# Expert Opinions on Postsecondary Outdoor Adventure Risk Management Curriculum Design: A Research Note

*by Nevin Harper*


## Abstract

A study of outdoor adventure risk management education was conducted in the fall of 2003 following the devastating avalanche season of winter 2002–2003, which took close to 50 lives in North America. The study was guided by the desire to better understand effective risk management training of outdoor adventure leaders in post-secondary institutions. Interviews with six industry-recognized outdoor adventure experts were conducted, yielding guidelines for postsecondary curriculum design. Although specifically addressing risk management curriculum, the resulting *Principles of Curriculum Design* are deemed applicable to other facets of outdoor adventure education. It was not the intent of this study to identify or articulate specific curricular content, but rather to highlight the means by which postsecondary programs can most effectively prepare future outdoor adventure leaders to assess and manage risk professionals. This research note provides a brief synopsis of the study and its findings, while full results have been published in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* (Harper & Robinson, 2005).


## Introduction

Outdoor adventure leaders are faced with making critical decisions in assessing and managing risk to keep students, clients or customers safe, while still enabling them to benefit from risk-related experiences (Priest & Gass, 1997). The knowledge and competency necessary to prevent accidents is essential for those who provide outdoor adventure programs or services. Risk management decisions made in the field tend to reflect an individual's character, experience, training and interpersonal skills, as well as organizational practices and beliefs. Considering the multiple variables that affect each individual's decisions, qualifying or quantifying risk management competency is a difficult task (Galloway, 2002). For this reason, risk management education has often remained closely aligned with policies and guidelines and not ventured too far into the intrapersonal skill development of individual students. This also explains why judgment and intuition have long been acknowledged as skills associated with experienced and effective outdoor adventure leaders, but remain difficult to incorporate into outdoor adventure education. Still, risk management curriculum that includes the development of personal skills such as judgment is reasoned to improve the decision-making process of students, while reducing their reliance on static rules.

## Rationale for Study

Negative public opinion following avalanche fatalities — namely seven Alberta high school students — during the 2002–2003 winter season in British Columbia inspired considerable discussion within the outdoor adventure industry. At the time of these events, the author was directing a wilderness program for adjudicated youth in British Columbia that had been negatively affected by a provincial government decision to restrict winter programming. The outdoor adventure industry reacted with concern to the government's proposal, which the industry believed was an inflated depiction of the level of risk of all outdoor adventure activities by government officials and in mainstream media (Frankel, 2003). These events were the catalysts for this study.

In a time of growth in the outdoor adventure industry in Canada (Cloutier & Valade, 2003), the relationship between academic preparation and the outdoor adventure industry was determined to be an ideal starting point for this inquiry. Originally designed to investigate how risk management might ideally be taught at the postsecondary level, early discussions with practitioners and academics identified a lack of consistency in how outdoor adventure curriculum was being designed and delivered. A further review of the literature found this to be a consistent issue in higher education — a lack of continuity between postsecondary outdoor adventure programs and the industry.

While it can be argued that key competencies and experiences of effective leaders can be developed without academic training, academic programs can deliver grounding in theory and interdisciplinary education. They are also crucial for the industry to remain current in a changing world and to train effective outdoor leaders. It should also be noted that many postsecondary programs exist and are training outdoor adventure leaders through multiple formats, ranging from certification programs of a few months to university degrees of four years.

### Methods

Qualitative methods were employed; primary data came from interviews of six industry-recognized outdoor adventure professionals. These individuals were chosen purposefully for their experience and reputations in the field, specifically in the area of risk assessment and safety management. Three faculty members, one from each of the three largest outdoor adventure postsecondary programs in British Columbia, were chosen, who collectively at the time of the study had almost 50 years' experience in the outdoor adventure business and 2,800+ field days, and had trained over 600 guides and instructors. The directors of three prominent outdoor adventure programs/businesses were also selected for interviews; these directors had a combined 60+ years' experience in the outdoor adventure business and 4,500+ field days, and had trained close to 1,000 guides and instructors. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that these six individuals have had a significant impact on the training and development of outdoor adventure leaders throughout Canada (although primarily in Western Canada) over the last 20+ years and were therefore able to provide an "expert opinion" that was sought for this study. Research participant selection did not, however, attend to gender, age, or cultural or geographic representation, thereby limiting generalization.

In an effort to explore the full range of participant understanding, interviews included predetermined questions, while also allowing for emergent dialogue on related issues and topics (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Interviews were each one hour in length, tape-recorded by the researcher, transcribed, reviewed numerous times, coded and interpreted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Results were compared and contrasted with related literature and, recognizing bias, interpreted by the researcher.

### Results

Interestingly, the findings of the study emerged and developed in a way that did not completely align with the original intent of the research. The nature of the inquiry to understand how to teach risk management in postsecondary education (i.e., curriculum)

consistently trended toward programmatic and organizational issues related to teaching risk management (i.e., curriculum design). The interviewees provided a considerable depth of understanding of both the educational and practical field experience related to risk management education. The following five themes emerged from the data as guiding principles for curriculum design:

1. Identify industry needs.
2. Define and articulate program goals.
3. Identify essential skills and competencies.
4. Determine teaching methodologies.
5. Select suitably qualified staff.

Each theme is briefly described below and key components highlighted.

**1. Identify industry needs.**
- Align curriculum with local and national industry standards.
- Identify necessary or preferred qualifications for leaders.
- Stay current with legal responsibilities of outdoor adventure leaders.

**2. Define and articulate program goals.**
- Assess the level of training to be offered and associated risk.
- Define course curriculum and progressions.
- Articulate industry needs expectations.
- Determine need for student selection process.

**3. Identify essential skills and competencies.**
- Identify technical skills to be learned and evaluated.
- Identify leadership skills to be learned and evaluated.
- Identify experience to be gained and demonstrated during the academic program.

**4. Determine teaching methodologies.**
- Determine appropriate teaching methodologies, which can include field experience, scenarios, history and theory and literature.

**5. Select suitably qualified staff.**
- Hire industry-recognized professionals.
- Ensure technical competency of staff.
- Ensure effective teaching and facilitation skills of staff.

### Implications

These five principles provide a generic template for the design and delivery of many facets of outdoor adventure education and training. This curriculum design framework aims to address the needs of students, postsecondary institutions and industry. Further to the curriculum design principles, the following recommendations were distilled from the findings and direct input from interviewees:

1. Greater alignment is needed between practitioners and faculty of postsecondary outdoor adventure programs to build continuity in training, education and research.

2. Students should learn outdoor adventure skills from industry-recognized professionals or faculty who can maintain currency through professional standing and practice.

3. Students may benefit from flexible academic program designs that relate to specific industry positions (e.g., shorter technical training with transferability to diploma or degree programs for later career opportunities).

4. The terms *risk assessment* and *safety management* were generally preferred over *risk management.*

5. Academic programs need to be clear in articulating to students the level of training to be offered, the objective risk involved, and industry expectations (legal and ethical) of an outdoor adventure leader with that level of training.

6. Effort to educate the general public on the realities of risk management in outdoor adventure activities is needed to reduce negative publicity when accidents or significant near misses occur.

## Conclusions

This paper provides a brief overview of a Canadian risk management study published in an international outdoor adventure journal. As academic literature has limited readership, the opportunity is taken here to offer some insight to the study findings, while providing reference to the full study for those interested. These findings have caused me to question my motives to continue teaching and leading outdoor adventure activities as I move toward an academic career. Faculty in postsecondary outdoor adventure programs may be displeased with the findings concerning who should teach skills to outdoor adventure students. This is understandable, since many professionals transition from the field into academia with hopes of maintaining their outdoor leadership training component. These findings serve as a challenge to those desiring to live in both worlds. With the competing demands of the academic system (i.e., teaching, research, service), it is incumbent upon outdoor adventure programs and faculty to ensure the highest possible standards for training can be provided to their students.

## References


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*Nevin Harper is a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota and research assistant in the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Research Cooperative. Currently living on Vancouver Island, Nevin provides evaluation and consulting services to outdoor adventure programs with special interests in Canadian therapeutic wilderness programs. He can be reached by e-mail at nharper@umn.edu.*