

Free Life: A Report from the “Outdoor Life for Women” Program in Sweden

by Kerstin Stenberg

The Swedish national curriculum, in its aims for sport and health, places specific emphasis on outdoor life both for recreation and as the basis of good health. Since it is often women that work in preschool, infant and junior schools, I felt it important that these teachers be given the opportunity to develop their skills, competence and personal insight in order to be more willing and capable of leading outdoor life activities. On this basis, in 2000 I started “Outdoor Life for Women” — a free-standing course to be given by the Department of Educational Sciences at Luleå University of Technology. The course offers female teaching professionals the opportunity to increase their personal competence in the skills required to develop and lead outdoor life pursuits in their places of work and to see such activities as natural pedagogic tools to help individuals develop, irrespective of age or physical capability. The course also aims to give insight into how outdoor life can, throughout the year, be used to foster cooperation, trust and enjoyment. Finally, the course aims to increase the delegates’ self-confidence and self-awareness and to give them insight into their own personal leadership style.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the nature of the Outdoor Life for Women program, including empirical research that analyses the participants’ experiences and outcomes of the course. The paper begins with details pertaining to the structure and aims of the Outdoor Life for Women course. Participant experiences and outcomes are described next, and outcomes for participants such as increased self-awareness, self-confidence, and insight into personal leadership style are highlighted. From there, I describe the Continuation Course that was designed to build on the outcomes of the

initial foundational course and offer some early participant reflections on these experiences. The reader will note throughout this paper that comments and reflections given by the participants of Outdoor Life for Women indicate that the course has contributed to a more active life and a continued interest in outdoor life in both their professional and private lives.

Course Structure and Aims

The course Outdoor Life for Women has been offered by the Department of Educational Sciences at Luleå University of Technology since the autumn of 2000. Students taking the course study over a full academic year on a part-time basis in the form of nine weekend meetings, complemented by self-study. Upon successful completion of the course, 10 academic points (equivalent to 25% of an academic year) are awarded. Although the course is aimed specifically at female educational professionals who work with young children, individuals with other backgrounds and interests can also take the course if there are openings.

The nine weekend sessions are spread over a full year allowing the course to have a seasonal flavour. The course covers theory, methodology, and technique and safety aspects of outdoor life. The course has a strong practical basis with activities taking place in locations around Luleå and also in more mountainous terrain. These activities include summer and winter hill walking, rock climbing, swimming, skiing, ice skating, canoeing and first aid including Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). As well, overnight stops in tents and mountain shelters are complemented by sessions concerning the history of outdoor life, education practices in

Sweden, and gender-related considerations. While the course aims to provide broad-based skills and knowledge, there is ample opportunity for individuals to further develop their personal skills.

Students taking the course must be motivated in order to get the most from the opportunities it presents. The course uses problem-based learning (PBL) with ongoing group discussions, reflection and individual presentations. Written reports are also required following the autumn meeting in Abisko, the winter ski weekend in Luleå, and the winter mountain course in Björkliden. These written reports are of a reflective nature and are structured by the students so that they cover students' own personal learning and development. This style of formal reporting is used because it lends to greater challenges for the students, all of whom live in close proximity to one another.

In addition to the outdoor activities and oral and written reporting, two other assignments are used to assess students' performance. First, by incorporating the course literature, students are required to choose a particular area to study in more depth. This work requires that they find and use additional reference material; it also requires the inclusion of personal observations and reflections. The second assignment asks the students to describe how they would approach introducing or developing outdoor life in an existing or proposed group from the point of view of methodology, pedagogy and didacticism. These formal assignments are presented during the final student sessions so that the rest of the group can gain additional knowledge through the presentations and discussions. As is typical in university settings, formal and informal evaluation of the course by the students takes place at the end of the course.

Formal Analysis of Participants' Experiences and Outcomes of the Course

The course Outdoor Life for Women has, at the time of writing, operated five times. The participants' written reflections from the academic year 2002/2003 form the empirical basis of my degree thesis, *A Free Life! — An Analysis of Women's Reflections from the Course Outdoor Life for Women*. This particular group was chosen because they were the first that submitted personal reflections in a written form.

The aim of my thesis was to investigate and interpret the thoughts and reflections of a group of female teachers regarding their own self-confidence, self-image and leadership style in the context of the outdoor life course. The research further investigated how well these thoughts reflected the aims formally described in national curricula and, more specifically, for sport and health teaching in preschool, junior and secondary schools. The research participants consisted of 14 individuals ranging in age from 22 to 45 years. The group predominantly comprised teaching professionals but also included physiotherapists, ergonomists and engineers; most participants were from the north of Sweden, with only one delegate from the south.

Recurring themes in the writings of all the delegates included self-confidence, lack of confidence expressed as fear or worry, awareness of the body, and insight into personal leadership styles and taking responsibility for others.

The majority of the delegates' reflections indicated some level of fear or worry; frequently the fear was expressed by an individual that she might not be capable of completing a given (physical) exercise. These feelings of concern were related to doing something new or unfamiliar and arose when the outcomes were uncertain. Most delegates initially saw the exercises as something that should be done as well as possible, and that a

certain level of performance was expected, rather than as opportunities to learn and improve within the time that was available and where it was quite acceptable to fail. To some extent this reflected their lack of self-confidence and lack of knowledge of their own abilities and potential, and resulted in a lot of unnecessary “negative energy.” Common to all the reflections was the fact that, when the women had completed the exercises, they had done extremely well and had often exceeded their own expectations.

As far as the awareness of their own bodies is concerned, my research highlighted many common themes. Many of the women delegates had not fully understood or appreciated the link between their bodies and their will power, thinking instead that their bodies and physical performance should be the same irrespective of the situation. By putting themselves through new physical challenges in the outdoors most developed a new understanding and appreciation of their bodies. A common reflection was of high expectations at the start of the course and the concern that their bodies were not up to the challenge. I noticed in many of the writings produced towards the end of the course that there was an increasing acceptance of their bodies and of themselves for what they are. Reading between the lines I see this as a sign that, over the duration of the course, the women gained an understanding and confidence in their fellow group members and a better insight into outdoor life and what can be gained from these experiences.

Many of the women’s comments also describe the expectations placed on women generally by society. In addition, their reflections indicate that many of the women now appreciate the challenges involved in leading a group. Rather than being concerned only about themselves, a few of the women described how they started to observe the group, becoming aware of what was happening in the group and of how the group was feeling and behaving. Another common development

that I observed was that the course delegates became more and more aware that they were there to learn. This may in part have been a reflection of the fact that it takes time to find one’s role in a group, or style as a leader, and that it also takes time and experience to be able to see the positive in situations that, at first, may appear replete with failure. All the delegates saw that their experiences from the course increased their knowledge about themselves and of outdoor life in general. Many commented positively that they intended to continue or further develop an active interest in the kind of outdoor activities experienced during the course.

The greatest differences in the women’s comments concerned their views of their own role as a leader in the context of outdoor life. This is not surprising given the wide range of backgrounds represented in the group and their experiences of outdoor life and leadership.

The comments made during oral discussions during this and other courses indicate that many women would not have been as keen to try all the activities, nor willing to push themselves as they did, if the course had had delegates of both genders. For many women, it was liberating to have a single-sex course, thereby eliminating the (potential) focus on competition and performance. Based on their own experiences of outdoor life, many women commented that in mixed groups it is all too common, and all too easy, for the men to take responsibility for those activities that culture and tradition see as gender specific. Outdoor Life for Women forced the delegates to do everything, irrespective of what accepted norms dictate, leading to new personal insights.

In the final discussion in my thesis I suggested that this course and outdoor life in general are excellent tools that help women improve their self-image. Having read all of the delegate’s reflections, which focus on increased self-insight, knowledge of their own body, and insight into leadership, I gained the clear

impression that the activities themselves took a lesser, but none the less important, role.

Outdoor Life for Women: Continuation Course

During the 2002/2003 course a desire grew amongst the delegates for a follow-up course. This was started the following year and was of similar duration. The aim of this continuation course was to give the delegates an opportunity to gain greater knowledge and experience of some of the activities from the foundation course. The course also had a slightly different structure, with fewer but longer outdoor sessions where greater physical demands were placed on the delegates in order to see how this affected their capacity to lead and what insight this would give them. Eight students from the foundation course expressed an interest when offered a place and seven completed the course.

The continuation course included hill walking in the autumn, long-distance ice skating, a ski tour of the northern Swedish mountains and a sea kayak tour around the archipelago near Luleå. All these activities involved carrying equipment and food, often for several days, in both winter and summer conditions. A total of seven sessions were arranged, ranging from four to seven days. The main focus of the course was leadership in outdoor life and the course used PBL as the main form of teaching with written reports required after each session. Reflective discussions were a natural part of all the outdoor sessions. Compared to the main program, the instructional content of this course was less, with a literature-based seminar, presentations of student reports, and a written assignment being the main non-practical evaluation components. The written assignment was an essay concerning the use of outdoor life to achieve

specific aims and was based on the course delegates' own working environment.

Participants' Reflections Concerning the Continuation Course

The continuation course has been offered only once. The empirical material, both written and oral, collected during the course delivery will be used as the basis of my master's thesis with the aims expressed for the course serving as its main themes. My thesis will again be based on the course delegates' comments and how well these reflect the course aims.

The aims of the continuation course are for the students

- to have gained greater understanding of the role and importance of the leader in developing quality outdoor experiences and education
- to be able to see the potential and limitations of outdoor life from a



- geographic and cultural perspective
- to appreciate the importance of self-reflection in personal development
- to understand the role that outdoor life can play when creating learning environments that encourage each individual to develop based on their own situation and potential
- to be aware of the role of outdoor activities in developing trust and cooperation.

The written reflections submitted by the delegates during the course were complemented by further written reflections obtained approximately eight months after the completion of the course. In these final reflections, I asked the delegates to describe the benefits that they felt they had gained from the course and to indicate how they had used the specific skills and knowledge gained in their everyday work.

The purpose of my master's thesis is to develop knowledge about the didactic nature of outdoor life and the role of the continuation course (the source of the empirical data for my research) in developing self-reflection.

Before the start of the course I informed the delegates that it would be a tough challenge and that they should be prepared both mentally and physically. It is interesting to note from their reflections, and also from my own observations, that those that were better prepared also made better decisions during the activities. Those that were better able to cope with the challenges presented were generally more focused and maintained a self-critical view in their reflections. As in the foundation course, I tried to limit my influence on the delegates by giving them considerable freedom as to how they structured and presented their written personal reflections after each outdoor session. It was only in the final submission, some eight months after the end of the course, that I asked a specific question (i.e., to describe what the course had meant to them and how they could use this knowledge at their places of work).

I would like to finish by presenting some of the comments from this last reflection. All the delegates commented on the personal insight that the course had given them. Most commented that, in one way or another, the course had led to a change in attitude as far as trying new things, in both work situations and privately. This change in attitude was not limited to physical outdoor activities. The delegates' earlier reflections were often characterised by feelings of joy, disappointment, anger, hope and frustration when they tried new things and did not always succeed. These feelings were replaced by a more reasoned calm in their final reflections, as if the delegates had found their place in the group and course and were happy with the experiences, knowledge and insight that the course provided. Several of the delegates commented that, following the completion of the course, they had continued to meet regularly and that outdoor life activities was the thing that they have in common and do together. Many delegates commented on how satisfying it was to be able to cope with being in the mountains or out on the sea using the skills and knowledge that the course offered, and how the course helped them develop a better understanding of their own abilities. As a result of the course, one delegate commented that she had begun trying other new activities and revisiting activities that she had not done for many years. This woman felt that her life had improved. Another woman commented that she was able to forget those things that were difficult during the course and, more importantly, that she felt that she was taken seriously when leading activities. All the comments and reflections given by the delegates indicate that the course had contributed to a more active life and a continued interest in outdoor life both professionally and privately.

Kerstin Stenberg developed and continues to facilitate the course Outdoor Life for Women through the Department of Educational Sciences at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden.