

In May of 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first people to reach the summit of Mt. Everest. Since then, over 4,000 people have reached this goal. Many of these were not professional climbers and had only moderate or even minimal climbing experience, and have hired professional guides to help them reach the summit.

Even more astounding numbers are associated with rafting on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. By 1949, only about 100 people had rafted this stretch of the river. By 1961, the number surpassed 1,000. Fifty years later, about 25,000 raft this stretch of the Colorado each year.

Such numbers speak to several salient trends in the outdoor adventure industry. First, the sustained and often explosive growth of adventure activities indicates their current level of popularity. Second, this growth is accompanied by similar increases in the number of organizations, associations, and companies featuring outdoor adventure experiences. Finally, the volume and breadth of these activities suggest a mix of participant benefits and outcomes that goes far beyond photographs and memories.

This third trend is most relevant to OAE because it is the outcomes and perceived benefits of outdoor pursuits that draw people to OAE experiences. In this chapter we examine the origins of the concept of adventure and explore the characteristics, fields, and definitions commonly associated with the OAE experience.

DEFINING ADVENTURE

The English word *adventure* comes from the French term *aventure*, which evolved from the Latin term *adventurus*, which means simply "about to arrive" but which over time has come to connote an exciting event that contains elements of risk and/or danger and where the outcome is uncertain.

The term *adventure* is broad enough to cover any enterprise potentially fraught with risk, such as a business venture, major life undertaking, or even trying a new restaurant. But for our purposes in this book, and relative to OAE in general, *adventure* will imply a pursuit in an outdoor setting within an educational context.

Characteristics of adventure as generated by practitioners and scholars in OAE include the following:

- Uncertainty of outcome (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993)
- Compelling tasks primarily concerned with interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Priest & Gass, 2005)
- A state of mind that begins with feelings of uncertainty about the outcome of a journey and always ends with feelings of enjoyment, satisfaction, or elation about the successful completion of that journey (see Colin Mortlock's *Adventure Education and Outdoor Pursuits* [1983])
- A search for excellence, an expression of human dignity, an act of the whole person. The concept of adventure implies not only action and intensity but also returning triumphantly, coming home, re-entry. This re-entry includes a period of telling, of piecing together, of sifting the meaning of the story (Nold, 1978).

Most agree that adventure involves uncertainty. Priest and Gass focus on the nurturing and social aspects of adventure, citing how people are changed both within themselves and in their relationships with those who experienced the adventure with them. Joseph Nold speaks of the coming back, the idea that no adventure is complete without the telling of the tale. This telling, and retelling, of the story evokes the archetypal adventure story, the encountering of unforeseen events of which the outcome is uncertain, and upon return, sharing the story with others. Think of one of the first great adventure stories, Homer's *Odyssey*, a recounting of the adventurous exploits of the Greek soldier Odysseus (known to the Romans as Ulysses), and how many times this tale or similar ones have been retold.

DEFINING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE EDUCATION

Adventure has long played a critical role in human development, but only recently have adventure and outdoor experiences shifted from necessary or utilitarian to primarily recreational. Consider the risk and danger our ancestors faced in getting close enough to kill a wild animal with a spear. In many ways, as technology has allowed humans to gain greater advantage over their natural environment, the world has become a far safer place, with a greater assurance of securing food, at least for some. With the advent of mechanization, our relationship

to risk has significantly evolved with most outdoor adventures usually not becoming matters of personal survival. Where we once accepted risk in order to survive, we now pursue risk in order to thrive—to feel as though we are making the most of our lives. During this shift in our perspective on risk, the field of OAE originated.

OAE has been defined in many ways, including all of the following:

- Direct, active, and engaging learning experiences that involve the whole person and have real consequences (Prouty, 2007)
- . . . education that focuses on the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships while participating in outdoor activities that include attributes of risk and challenge (Wagstaff & Attarian, 2009, p. 15)
- . . . education that is conducted in a wilderness-like setting or through nature and physical skills development to promote interpersonal growth or enhance physical

skills in outdoor pursuits (Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006, p. 8.)

Because it can be applied in a variety of settings and situations and because it remains true to the original concept of adventure, in this text we will use the following definition of OAE: *A variety of teaching and learning activities and experiences usually involving a close interaction with an outdoor natural setting and containing elements of real or perceived danger or risk in which the outcome, although uncertain, can be influenced by the actions of the participants and circumstances.*

Let's look more closely at our definition of OAE. First, in the teaching, learning, and experiencing that occur in OAE, education is of primary importance. Wagstaff and Attarian (2009), for example, suggest that OAE instructors serve three functions in the realm of adventure education: facilitating the experience, safeguarding the experience, and minimizing the impacts on the natural environment. Of course each of these functions



Outdoor adventure education involves direct, active learning that involves the whole person and has real consequences.
Courtesy of Dan Smith.

involves making the experience as educational as possible for all participants, taking advantage of every opportunity to teach the *hows*, *whens*, and *whys* implicit in each experience. In a sense, OAE instructors often strive to *explain* the adventure activity in addition to actually *doing* the activity.

Second, note the (typically) close interaction with the outdoor environment. Although some climbing walls and rope course facilities are indoors, a natural setting serves as a key component in the education process for the vast majority of OAE programs—for reasons we shall explore later.

Third, in our definition and most others, OAE typically contains elements of real or perceived risk. Risk (discussed further in chapter 4) can be real and inherent to an activity, such as a rock fall in a rock-climbing area, or can be merely (mis)perceived by participants within a safe activity. That is, instructors can manage an adventure site to make activities seem risky when in fact there is a very small chance of actual injury or loss. One example is employing a top rope in rock climbing where there is little chance of rockfall and a competent person is belaying the climber. For the participant, it often seems quite risky and dangerous when, in reality, the activity is quite safe.

Fourth, in our definition of OAE, outcomes tend to be uncertain. Such factors as weather, terrain, participant abilities and attitudes, and equipment can make program outcomes quite unpredictable. Uncertainty plays an important role in adventure programs primarily because of what it can teach participants. Although often psychologically uncomfortable, uncertainty can force participants to confront their anxieties, analyze their decision-making abilities, and assess their physical, emotional, and leadership skills.

Of course the amount of risk involved in uncertain outcomes can be significantly influenced by the skills of the participants. Participants can use their intuition, training, personal abilities, and team resources to make good decisions and take effective action to deal with uncertain outcomes.

Circumstance and luck also play roles in uncertain outcomes. The ability to make accurate decisions tends to be largely affected by circumstance. Despite ambiguity inherent to many situations, the goal is always to gather as much information as possible, analyze the situation, make an informed and careful decision, and take the best possible action given the circumstances.

In upcoming chapters we will further explore our definition and understanding of OAE. For

now it should be helpful to discuss two fields inherently related to OAE: outdoor education and experiential education. Each of these fields has its own long history and philosophy.

Outdoor Education

Outdoor education can be a controversial concept in the realm of teaching in the outdoors. Although some adventure educators and environmental educators contend that outdoor education is not a part of their field, several authors write otherwise. One of the earliest definitions of outdoor education comes from elementary school teacher L.B. Sharp, who said, "Those things which can best be taught outdoors should there be taught" (1947, p. 43). Later, Donaldson and Donaldson added that "Outdoor education is education *in*, *about*, and *for* the outdoors" (1968).

Priest (1986) wrote that outdoor education has been described as a place, a subject, a reason, a method, a topic, and a process. He believed that all are part of outdoor education. Later, along with his colleague John Miles, he defined outdoor education as "an experiential method of learning with the use of all senses. It takes place primarily, but not exclusively, through exposure to the natural environment. In outdoor education, the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on relationships concerning people and natural resources. Historically, two branches of outdoor education have been identified: environmental education and adventure education. Truly functional outdoor education incorporates aspects of both approaches" (Miles & Priest, 1990, p. 113).

Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert (2006) described outdoor education as being comprised of three primary components: physical skills, interpersonal growth or educational skills, and ecological relationships. The primary method of presenting education including these components is experiential education. Moreover, Gilbertson and his colleagues suggest that adventure education, environmental education, interpretation, and ecotourism are aspects taught within the realm of outdoor education (figure 1.1). In Gilbertson's model, adventure education is closely aligned to outdoor education along three dimensions: ecological relationships, physical skills, and interpersonal or educational skills. That is, where OAE and outdoor education coincide is in the areas of engaging in activities that involve the natural environment, practicing

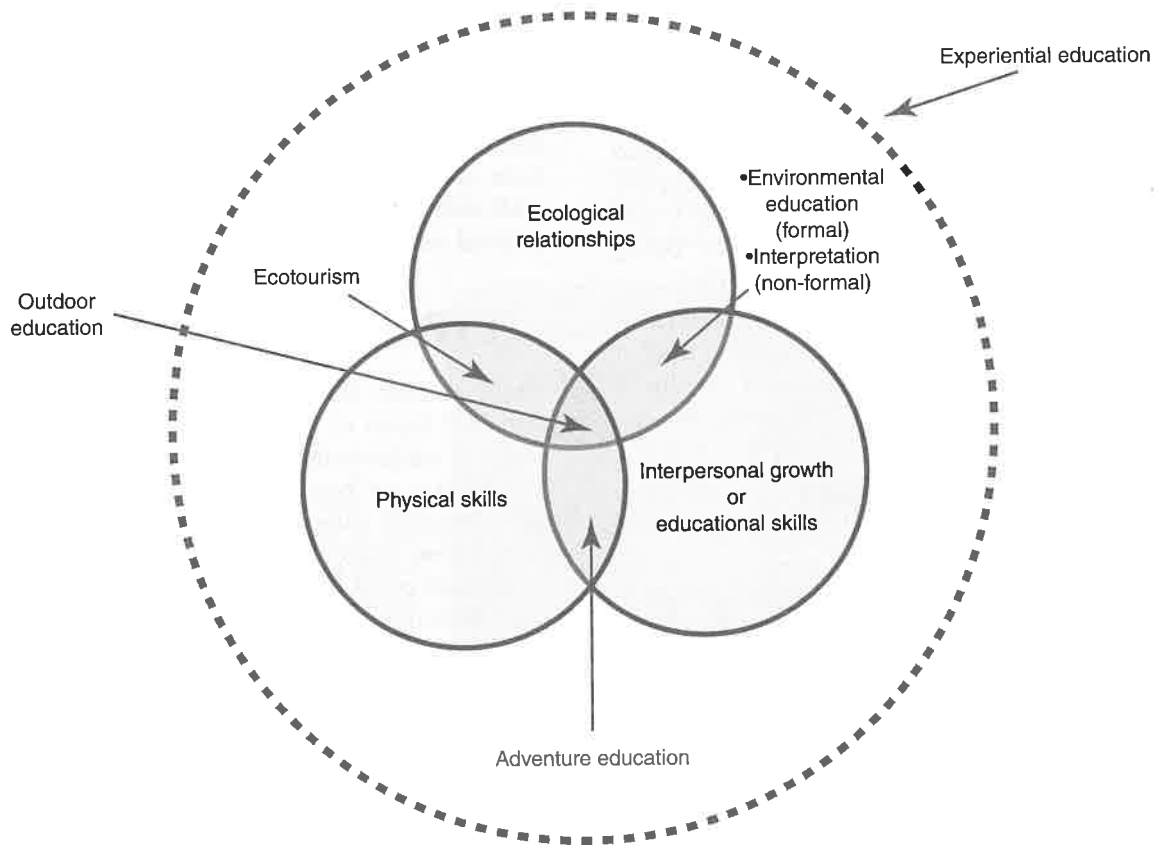


Figure 1.1 Gilbertson's model of outdoor education.

Reprinted, by permission, from K. Gilbertson, T. Bates, T. McLaughlin, and A. Ewert, 2006, *Outdoor education: Methods and strategies* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 6.

physical movement and skill development, and being part of a small group for either recreational or educational purposes. In addition, according to Gilbertson's model, encompassing the various components of OAE, environmental education, and outdoor education is experiential education.

Experiential Education

Gilbertson et al. defined experiential education as a method, a profession, and a philosophy (2006). In his work *Experience and Nature* (1938), philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey delineated the use of direct experience in education, or experiential education. According to Dewey, experiential education requires a great deal of planning, organization, and structure by the teacher. Experiential education is not merely having an experience in the outdoors; it must follow rigorous scientific principles, employing relevant learning theories based on systematic testing. Dewey claimed that the teacher's role in experiential education is to ensure that students

have an educational opportunity rather than a noneducative (having no effect on learning) or miseducative (learning detrimental) learning experience. Since Dewey's writings, experiential education has become a field of study with an international following. For example, the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) a leading proponent of international experiential education, defines experiential education as a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities.

Using this definition as a foundation, experiential education has a long history and is based on a number of principles including the following:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.

- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others, and learner to the world at large.
- The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk taking, and uncertainty because the outcomes of experience cannot be totally predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments, and preconceptions and how these influence the learner.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.

<http://www.aee.org/about/whatIsEE>

As can be readily noted, many of the principles associated with experiential education also have meaning and connections to the adventure education field. Thus it is not surprising that OAE and experiential education have common roots, values, and outcomes. Moreover, it is often assumed that outdoor education, adventure education, and outdoor adventure education

and direct experience go hand in hand and use overlapping techniques and methods within their educational approaches. Moreover, it should be noted that the design, implementation, and evidence associated with experiential education have similar or identical components in how OAE activities and programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated for evidence.

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS

There is more than one type of definition, and different types of definitions connote different levels of understanding and representation. The definitions we have summarized to this point are generally taken from published works or established sources. But these are not the only definitions of OAE. Organizations and individuals have their own working definitions, which might be one of three types—constitutive, personal, or operational—or a blend of these.

Constitutive Definitions

Although earlier in the chapter we presented a definition of OAE, this definition is not above scrutiny. It is our definition. As the definition is published in this book, it is considered a *constitutive*, or established, definition. A constitutive definition is the definition that is recognized by professionals in the field. A professional conformity can be found through the professional organization of the topic (e.g., the Association for Experiential Education for adventure education, experiential education, or outdoor education). Another source for a professionally recognized definition is the literature in the field. This literature is commonly reviewed by peers considered experts in the profession. Examples of peer-reviewed journals relevant to OAE include the *Journal of Leisure Research*; *Journal of Experiential Education*; *Leisure Sciences*; *Research in Outdoor Education*; *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*; and *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*. The literature on OAE also includes scholarly books or articles by professionals in the field, including *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming* (Priest & Gass, 2005), *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006), *Adventure Education: Theory and Application* (Prouty, Panicucci, & Collinson, 2007), *Leadership and Administration of Outdoor Pursuits* (Blanchard, Strong, & Ford, 2007), and