

Reinterpreting the Outward Bound Process Model for Use by Expanded Learning Practitioners

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OUTWARD BOUND

Overview

In the field of expanded learning opportunities[1] there is widespread interest in effective methods of promoting social emotional learning in students. The research insights popularized by Paul Tough in his book *How Children Succeed*[2] reflect the general consensus that success in college and career requires much more than just academic achievement. What this paper will call "social emotional learning" is variously described as character development,[3] youth development[4] or the means by which youth acquire perseverance,[5] grit,[6] or resilience.[7] By whatever name, there is growing belief that expanded learning opportunities provide an ideal setting to cultivate these affective and interpersonal domains.

To seize these opportunities, educators are seeking evidence-based pedagogies that promote social and emotional learning[8] (SEL). Much of this effort focuses on after school, out-of-school, and summer programs because of their greater flexibility relative to traditional classrooms. For example, summer learning practitioners are integrating enrichment with academics to promote SEL[9] and science educators are working to blend SEL with informal science activities to more effectively address the Next Generation Science Standards.[10] The urgency of these efforts is accelerating as evidence grows that SEL programming enhances academic achievement,[11,12] and that key aspects of character predict success in school and life.[13,14]

For expanded learning practitioners, it is instructive to reexamine the theory of change that underpins one of the longest standing and most highly regarded organizations that focuses on SEL. The efficacy of Outward Bound's method for promoting SEL is reflected by its adoption in over 30 countries around the world and by evidence of success accumulated over five decades in settings from remote wilderness to urban centers.[15,16,17,18,19,20]

The most frequently cited theory of change for Outward Bound was articulated in the 1976 paper "The Exploration of the Outward Bound Process" by Victor Walsh and Gerald Golins.[21] Known as the Walsh-Golins Model, it describes the essential phases of an educational process that inherently promotes SEL. Walsh-Golins is a useful guide to practitioners when considering program design and staff training when SEL is a desired outcome of an expanded learning initiative. Figure 1 presents the phases of the model as they were summarized in the original paper.

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Walsh-Golins was written to describe programs that in 1976 were typically conducted in a wilderness setting where a crew of 10 was the social environment and dramatic outdoor challenges were the problem solving tasks. However, the model can be used to improve programs in a variety of settings that are more accessible and cost effective for expanded learning, especially when serving an urban population and implementing at scale.[22] This paper offers practitioners an analysis of best practices and critical success factors for implementing this proven methodology for promoting SEL.

Understanding How the Model Works

Most children are *motivated learners* as defined by the model but it often takes a skilled educator to draw that learner out. Thoughtful application of phases two and three can dramatically accelerate engagement in learning and give even reluctant or oppositional learners a fresh start.

Immersing students in a *physical environment* that is dramatically different from their familiar surroundings can elicit dramatically different behaviors. Students internalize the behavioral norms of their home, neighborhood, and school house and it can be difficult to change those habits while

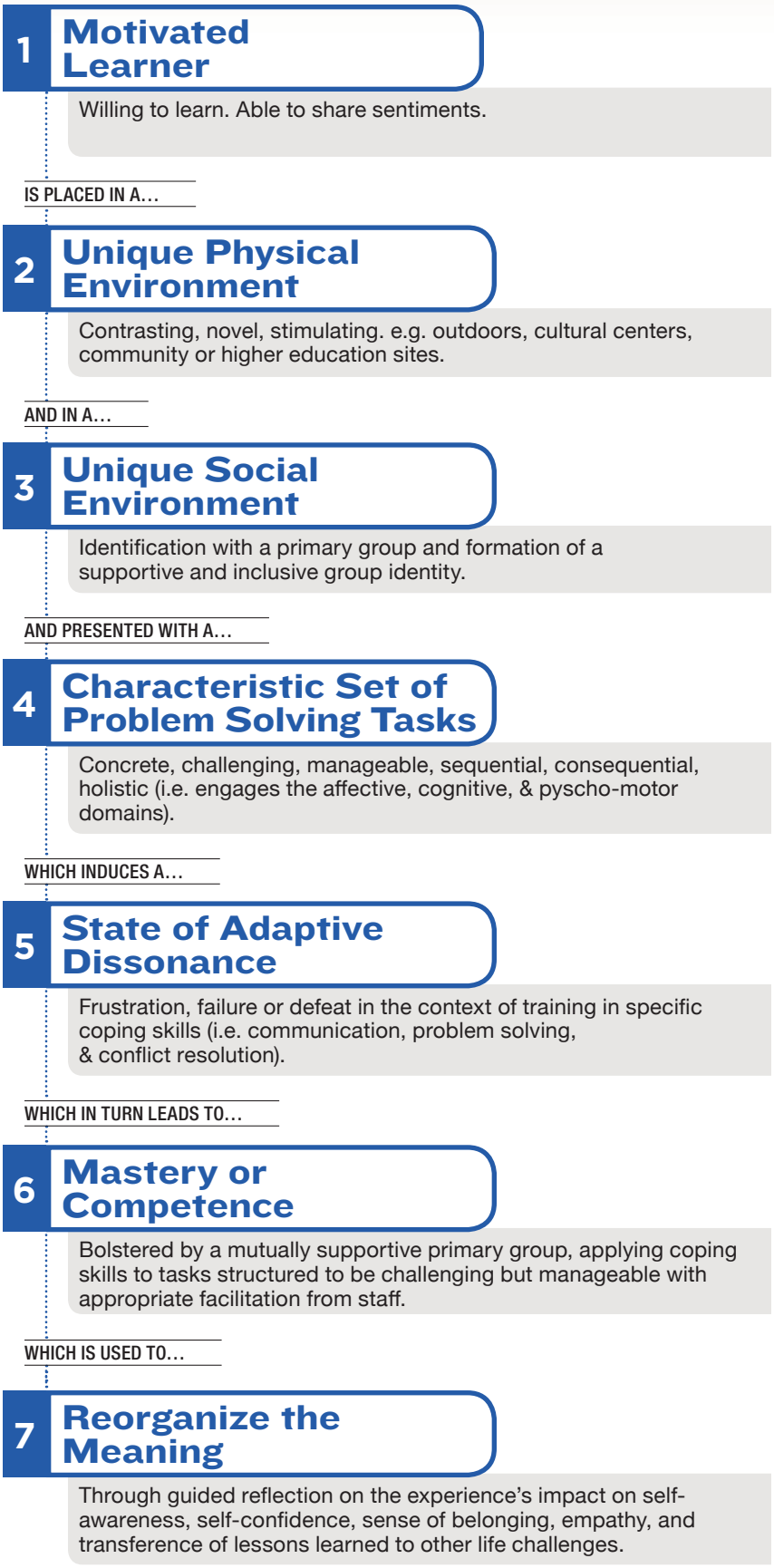

Figure 1. The Walsh-Golins Model

working in the same familiar settings. When the learning environment is novel and unfamiliar, students can be induced to accept a new set of behavioral norms.

Thus, there is enormous leverage in the selection of a distinctive physical environment for expanded learning. A college campus, a community theatre, an art gallery, youth club, community sailing center, or outdoor setting can all prompt a recalibration of attitude as students adapt to the new situation. This is an inherent strength of many expanded learning models and it should be optimized by choosing the location most favorable to changing a students' frame of mind. For example, given the choice between conducting a mock trial in a conference room or a court room, the court room will almost certainly evoke a greater sense of gravity with an attendant impact on how students conduct themselves.

To the extent that a unique physical environment opens up the mind to new attitudes and behaviors, practitioners must capitalize on that opening by establishing a *social environment* conducive to SEL. It is vital that students identify with a primary group that has a safe, supportive, and inclusive culture. Many successful programs use teambuilding activities[23] and rituals such as sharing circles[24] and social contracting[25] to establish and reinforce a group identity founded in trust. It is within the primary group that students must be trained in relevant coping skills, e.g. effective listening, giving and receiving feedback,[26] and rubrics for problem solving,[27] conflict resolution,[28] anger management,[29] etc. These skills are just as useful for designing and building a robot as they are for producing a play.

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Selecting the correct *problem solving tasks* is informed by a student-centered approach to achieving the desired outcomes. The educator's task is to assess the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical readiness of the students and to present tasks that are challenging but designed for success.[30] Struggling with these tasks in a supportive primary group with a set of relevant coping skills is the essential process by which SEL emerges.

If the level of challenge of the tasks is properly matched to student needs, the tasks will push the students into a *state of adaptive dissonance*. Early success that builds confidence needs to be followed by frustration and failure or the tasks are too easy.[31] Frustration and its side effects (anger, conflict, and withdrawal) create an opportunity to practice coping skills and the role of the educator is to gently steer students back to those skills. Perseverance emerges when students are encouraged to embrace frustration as a healthy part of the learning process rather than a sign that something has gone wrong.

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At this stage it is essential for educators to allow plenty of time for the process to unfold. Higher order thinking is invoked only when the obvious solutions to problems do not work. Resilience only emerges in the face of adversity. Bailing students out after their first unsuccessful attempt undermines the value of the struggle. Even when the crisis seems irrelevant to the original task (e.g. the group's art installation does not fit through the door), there is opportunity to assess, analyze, collaborate, persevere, and create a solution. Coaching, encouraging, reminding, and refocusing are the key inputs from a skilled facilitator who is supportive but allows the students to do the hard work.

With challenging but manageable tasks, a strong primary group, relevant skills, and careful facilitation, students will eventually arrive at *mastery or competence*. The greater the struggle, the greater the sense of accomplishment and the greater the gain in self-confidence and affinity to the

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group. This stage in the process provides an opportunity to reflect upon the cycle of challenge→dissonance→mastery and to abstract lessons from it.

Adolescents are often more willing than adults to *reorganize the meaning of the experience* and apply lessons learned to larger life issues. Their candor and insights can be striking. It is essential to openly discuss the evolution of the group identity, the struggle with the tasks at hand, the mistakes, bravery, miscommunication, humor, pettiness, and compassion that inevitably emerge during any intense team effort. Out of the discussion come self-awareness, compassion, and a maturity which enables students to anticipate the demands of future challenges and be better prepared to meet them.

Implications for Program Design in Expanded Learning

To be confident that implementation of the Walsh-Golins Model will effectively promote SEL, careful attention must be paid to program design. Selecting a contrasting location and organizing student participation around a primary group are fundamental design decisions. While inherent features of many programs,[32] the location and primary group can be optimized by understanding how they create the environment in which SEL can thrive.

As noted above, there is great power in selecting a novel and contrasting physical environment that inspires openness to new ways of thinking and acting. Ideally, a compelling location is available for all phases of program delivery. The impact of the venue can be optimized by designing creative daily routines that take best advantage of the setting. The great hall of a museum or the stage of a theatre can be entered silently each day for the opening circle. The most expansive vista of a lakeside camp can be the gathering place for reflection on the group's progress at the end of each day. Ritual use of silence and contemplation can enhance the location's power to change the mindset of the students.

A supportive and inclusive primary group is the most essential element of the model. Time and space must be allocated early in the program design to establish the appropriate group culture. It is at this stage when a distinctive physical environment is most useful and when tasks specifically designed for teambuilding can be enormously effective. Launching a program with a retreat at a special location is an excellent design, especially if a venue familiar to students is the only option for routine operations.

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While a retreat can be useful, it is more important that the elements of Walsh-Golins be built into the core activities of an expanded learning program, not just into an opening retreat or into periodic sessions that focus on enrichment rather than academics. For example, a group could be tasked to collect and analyze data on invasive species in a local wetland and develop an argument for remediation and protection. While directly addressing academic standards, the various steps in that process meet all the model's criteria for problem solving tasks (concrete, challenging, manageable, sequential, consequential, and holistic). If the degree of difficulty is appropriate to the students, these tasks will drive the cycle of challenge→dissonance→mastery.

In addition to providing appropriate guidance on the academic aspects of the project, the educator must allocate time to use the inevitable frustrations and setbacks as an opportunity to coach team members to utilize their coping skills. In an extended project, the process is iterative, using guided reflection to reorganize the meaning of each problem solving phase to better prepare for subsequent

challenges. The same process can be applied to the complex tasks associated with producing a play, building a small boat, or cultivating a garden.

Adaptive dissonance takes time. From a design perspective, when academic tasks are used as the basis to drive SEL, adequate time must be allowed for students to struggle through each problem solving phase. If the schedule requires "moving on so we can cover all the material" then the struggle will be cut short, a solution will be imposed by the educator, and the opportunity for higher order thinking will be lost. It is essential to allow time for students to get stalled out, set back, and thrown off course and then to recover through the exercise of perseverance and specific coping skills.

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While it is necessary that some tasks be designed to require teamwork and collaboration, the primary group structure can also support individual projects. Art, writing, numerical analysis, public speaking; all can be learned in a group but are exercised individually. In this case peer assessments should be used to engage all the members of the group in the performance of their peers.[33] In this way the primary group can support its members when facing challenges with which the individual must struggle alone.

Implications for Staff Training

The requirements of the Walsh-Golins Model call for a focus on techniques that are straightforward but often neglected or assigned to specialized enrichment instructors. While specialized instructors may have a place in retreats or in periodic enrichment activities, the greatest value comes from integrating the model's process into all activities within the program. To achieve that, all program educators need to be competent in the model's essential elements.

Depending on the nature of an expanded learning program, educators are assumed to bring appropriate subject matter expertise (e.g. drama, technology, ecology) as well as a baseline competence in student management, lesson planning, and delivery. To implement Walsh-Golins, staff training must supplement these skills with the following competencies:

- The ability to lead the primary group in whatever daily rituals are established for the program.
- The ability to instruct the group in the core coping skills using any of the simple rubrics previously referenced.
- The ability to present a challenging but manageable set of tasks, geared to the particular students' capabilities and allowing sufficient time for the students to struggle with the cycle of challenge→dissonance→mastery.
- The ability to coach students in the use of their coping skills without solving the problem for them.
- The ability to guide reflection and discussion of the group's development and of the problem solving process so as to abstract lessons that can be applied in the future.

Summary

Many of the necessary design features of the Walsh-Golins Model are natural components of existing expanded learning programs, specifically a novel setting and a group structure. Likewise many programs utilize teambuilding activities to develop the primary group.

The real power of the model is in intentionally linking its components together and embracing the cycle of challenge→dissonance→mastery as a learning mode that can be applied beyond the realm of specialized enrichment activities. The crucial adaptation is to see *all activities* of the program as opportunities to drive the SEL process by requiring students to apply perseverance and coping skills in working toward mastery.

Applying the model across all activities requires that all educators embrace their role in facilitating the SEL process. Likewise it requires the allocation of sufficient time to train educators in a new set of instructional skills and then train students in the essential coping skills they will need to succeed. Most important, it is essential to allow adequate time for students to struggle with complex tasks, work through setbacks, puzzle over vexing problems, and devote themselves to solving problems that matter to them.

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The most critical competencies for the educators are faith and patience. Walsh-Golins is based on the belief that when young people take on challenges they see as relevant and authentic, they are capable of much more than we might think. Adaptive dissonance is the students' gateway to their own undiscovered greatness. It takes a lot of faith to wait patiently while it struggles to emerge.[34]

The Author

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Endnotes

1 By expanded learning opportunities (ELO), this article refers the schema provided by Redd, Z., Boccanfuso, C., Walker, K., Princiotta, D., Knewstub, D., Moore, K. Expanded learning time for learning both inside and outside the classroom: A review of the evidence base. *Child Trends,* 2012.
From page 10: "ELO program models: provide academic and learning supports… during or outside of regular operating school-day hours (often to supplement in-school learning)… Examples of ELO programs include academically-oriented social interventions that provide services through before- and after-school programs, summer learning and summer school programs, weekend programs, youth development programs, service learning programs, vocational programs, academic-oriented mentoring programs, multi-service programs…"

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3 Outward Bound in the U.S. describes its outcomes as Character Development, Leadership and Service. It describes Character Development as:
Demonstrating increased self-confidence and self-actualization.
Demonstrating compassion toward others and living a healthy and balanced life.

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5 Carroll, John B. *A model of school learning.* 1963.

6 Tough, op. cit.

7 Bernard, Bonnie. Fostering resilience in children. *ERIC Digest,* 1995.

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[15] Fletcher, B.A., MA BSc. Students of Outward Bound Schools in Great Britain—A Follow-up Study. University of Bristol, School of Education, Bristol, England, 1970. This earliest study compiled various survey results including one from 832 sponsoring employers regarding program impact on their entry level employees who attended Outward Bound programs in England, Wales, and Scotland. Employers reported that their desired outcomes were "General character training", "Growth in maturity", and "Ability to mix well with others". Over 70% of employers reported that their employees showed "Increased self-confidence" and "Greater maturity". 52% reported that their employees received a promotion or more responsibility as a result of the course.

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[17] Bacon, Stephen. The career beginnings Outward Bound component: An empirical evaluation. Outward Bound USA, Greenwich, CT, 1987.

[18] Bacon, Stephen. *The effects of racially homogeneous and* heterogeneous Outward Bound groups on the self-report survey scores and drop out rates of minority students. Outward Bound USA, Greenwich, CT, 1988.

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[21] Walsh, Victor, & Golins, Gerald. The exploration of the Outward Bound process. 1976, downloaded from www.wilderdom.com/pdf/Walsh&Golins1976ExplorationOBProcess.pdf.

[22] Thanks to Victor Walsh for encouraging this reinterpretation, commenting on early drafts and providing insights into applying the model beyond the context of Outward Bound's traditional wilderness programs.

[23] For example, see Cowstails and Cobras II: A guide to games, initiatives, ropes courses, and adventure curriculum. Karl E. Rohnke, Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2012 at http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/191975.Cowstails_and_Cobras_II

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[28] For example, see the VOMP Conflict Resolution Model. downloaded from http://stambytes.edublogs.org/files/2012/01/Conflict-Resolution-V.O.M.P.-13df19q.pdf, June 2014.

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[31] The state of adaptive dissonance is closely related to the "storming" stage of the Forming Storming Norming Performing team development model articulated by Bruce Tuckman in 1965 and summarized at http://www.businessballs.com/tuckmanformingstormingnormingperforming.htm.

[32] Although not usually viewed as expanded learning opportunities, well-coached athletic teams meet all the requirements of the model.

[33] For example, see Student-centered assessment guide: Peer assessment. Jobs for the Future and Nellie Mae Education Foundation, downloaded from http://studentsatthecenter.org/PeerAssessment, June 2014.

[34] Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, often told the story of an exchange between a philosopher and a schoolmaster. The impatient schoolmaster remarked, "I have no faith in this boy." The philosopher responded, "Then you have no right to educate him."

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