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# Perceptions in (Outdoor) Education: Using Openness and Vulnerability as Learning Tools

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## ***Perceptions in (Outdoor) Education: Using Openness and Vulnerability as Learning Tools***

*Kevin Earhart Sutton, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*In this presentation Kevin discusses the “masks” that we all wear and how outdoor education can be a tool to help empower people to take control of the masks they wear each day. Examples of masks include proficiency, extraversion and stubbornness.*

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### **Keywords: outdoor education, climbing, full value contract**

Hi. My name is Kevin. It's 1:30 and hopefully we've all had a chance to eat, use the facilities, and gone through our normal daily routines or maybe not normal if you're usually in a cubicle. In case you don't know, there are bathrooms in the next building over, out the door and to your right. One note on attentiveness, if you're like me and have a hard time staying in one place for too long, feel free to stand up, stretch, or get some water.

So we're here, in this classroom at the North Cascades Institute, in North Cascades National Park, on the traditional land of the Skagit Peoples. There are many folks who have made this moment and the coming days possible and those that immediately come to my mind are friends, family, and staff from NCI, North Cascades National Park, and Western Washington University. Now I know I just cast a broad net and probably missed some people.

Why are we here? I'm guessing it's primarily to support those you care about, but I suggest it might also be to see someone else's exploration and that you might find a deeper understanding in yourself. My presentation is about the sides of ourselves we choose to show in the various aspects of our lives; I choose to describe this using the term “masks.”

My educational and professional background is teaching outdoor education, which encompasses environmental education, experiential education, adventure education, and so much more. What I do is teach emerging outdoor educators hard skills (rock climbing, backpacking, mountaineering, outdoor living) and soft skills (judgement, decision-making, group development, group management); these are the two pieces of educational leadership that the field of outdoor education has helped develop.

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## Story

I call myself an outdoor educator but early on, 2006 or so, an instructor told me to “fake it til you make it” and I took this to heart for a long time. I was in an outdoor leadership program that focused on student teaching and leadership days. Being a newcomer to the field, there were ABSOLUTELY times that I faked it:

- facilitating teamwork games for the student government council
- assisting in the beginning rock climbing class when I had only finished the class the previous term
- becoming the president of the outdoors student club AND being a program ambassador to the entire student body

This program was highly skills-based. I made it, graduated, and moved on to a different college to finish my bachelor’s degree. This new program was highly theory-based. Again, I did some faking:

- writing my first 15+ page papers
- completing research projects with formal classroom presentations (the kind where you wear nice clothes and have poster boards and power points and such)

I graduated and moved into the professional world of outdoor education. Although I had become competent as I progressed through school, there were still times that I signed up for things I had very little clues about how to do...again, faking it but making it:

- scheduling and managing the volunteer crew for an number of international conferences
- becoming an interpretive ranger with Oregon State Parks and being in charge of writing curriculum for a brand new program

With each of these experiences, I was donning the mask of someone who knows what he’s doing. I did know what I was doing but I was still uncomfortable and was continuing to learn and grow as an educator.

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## Story 2

In 2013 I was climbing with three friends at Looking Glass Rock, a 4,000 foot granite mountain rising out of the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. So to set this story, it’s February around 1:30 in the afternoon, not a lot of light left, but I decided to lead the first pitch of *Sundial Crack*, a route that had some interesting complications.

1. It's granite slab, which means less grip. You have to press down on the rock instead of pulling.
2. One of my friends already started the route but came down after 20 feet because he wasn't in the right mental space. This is important because he was essentially our guide for the day, the expert.
3. It's a traditional route, which means you place your own protection instead of clipping into bolts that have been drilled into the rock.
4. The cracks are outward-tapering horizontal things called eyebrows. So when you put a piece of gear in, you have to make sure it's solid and won't pop out. Here in the PNW, most of our basalt has vertical cracks with great constriction points for placement.
5. Tri-cams are the best pieces of gear for eyebrows and I've never placed tri-cams. This is a tri-cam. Compared to a spring loaded cam, tri-cams can be placed passively or actively depending on how you flip them.

For the climbers reading this, *Sundial Crack* is a 4-pitch, grade 3, trad. 5.8. For the non-climbers, that's 430 feet separated into 4 smaller chunks of relatively easy climbing.

I climbed the first pitch (80 feet) with no issues. Remember, this is after our guide backed off. Ryan lowered me down and everyone took their turn climbing. As we were deciding whether to leave or not, I blurted out "I want to try the second pitch", now the second pitch is a 100 foot traversing route at about a 45 degree angle up and right from the belay.

All four of us re-climb to the top of the first pitch, the gear is handed to me, I take a deep breath and start out.

I work my way up and there are a lot of eyebrows but not all are good, so I place when I can and test each piece before moving on.

I'm good, I'm comfortable.

"Slow is fast, fast is precise." That's my mantra.

Thirty feet before the anchors with 6 pieces of gear left. I place a tri-cam, pull the rope to clip, and hear clattering...my previous piece 12 feet below me popped out of the wall.

\*Deep breath\* "Refocus, place a second piece, keep climbing."

"Slow is fast, fast is precise."

Twenty feet left, place. 13 feet, place. 8 feet, place.

I clip the anchors, yell "take" and as I'm cheered from below and the rope tightens on my harness, I let go of the wall...3 more pieces along the route pop out. That could have been disastrous if I had fallen.

It seems comfort didn't equal ability. My enthusiasm to climb clouded my judgement. In this instance faking it could have had a terrible result.

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### ***Fake It Til You Make It***

Fake it til you make it...I believe that instructor in 2006 used this phrase as a pedagogical component (teaching style) to instill confidence until achieving competence. I believe there are specific skills and traits that make up the foundation for all good educators: those are leadership, interpretation, facilitation, and instruction and it is through these traits that I choose to define myself and teach through. This is my educational philosophy:

**Leadership:** Whether leading from the front, middle, or back, good leadership is understanding the differences between didactic and transmissive styles and knowing when to use one or the other. It is an accurate assessment of strengths and areas to improve upon in oneself and others, the continuing development of judgement and decision-making, and the ability to effectively implement decisions.

**Interpretation:** Interpretation involves more than explaining the topic, environment, or process. It is a method of provoking, relating, and revealing information. It is engaging people with ideas, forming connections, and encouraging caring, stewardship, and a desire to be involved.

**Facilitation:** Facilitators help groups become more effective by balancing participation and results. A good facilitator recognizes each participant and encourages collaboration and cooperation, positive group dynamics, and produces meaningful outcomes through action, inaction, and debriefing.

**Instruction:** Flexible. Adaptive. Intuition. Self-confidence. Enthusiasm.

I believe a good instructor embodies these keywords and a great many more. A good instructor imparts knowledge in a way that students find relevant and useful. Engaging students and creating a sense of ownership fosters growth.

A learning environment is almost undefinable and ever-evolving. Good educators are models of professionalism for students and have a responsibility to provide a safe, engaging, and high-quality learning experience through curriculum that challenges students while evolving to stay relevant. I believe teaching is an opportunity that should not be squandered, yet embraced with all its challenges because it is well worth the reward.

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## **Fake It Til You Make It Part 2**

I also believe in honesty and an accurate portrayal of oneself. I believe in truth, sincerity, and not compromising oneself. Ask anyone who knows me to describe me in one word, and I have done this, and you'll get answers like:

Kat - stubborn	Lindsey - thorough
Petra - difficult	Lauren - loyal
Joshua - determined	Liz - caring

It might seem weird but I like those words. They're accurate. Even stubborn and difficult; I think those six words provide tremendous insight into who I am.

"Fake it til you make it". You can probably tell I don't like that phrase. It implies a falsity, an inaccurate sense or at least an inaccurate portrayal of self, yet seems to come up in outdoor education quite frequently.

I started thinking about the various ways we (educators, students, instructors, everyone) behave and portray ourselves in different circumstances - our use of masks.

A few examples of my masks:

- Surface level: I swear in front of my friends but I don't swear in front of my parents, my instructors, or my students
- A little deeper: I have a lot of anxiety but work at being outwardly calm

Often, these masks are used in conjunction with our comfort level in a certain task or situation. There's this thing called the "Zone of Proximal Development," which is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help - following an example and gradually developing the ability to do a task without help.

A few examples:

- learning how to ride a bicycle - everyone needs help in the beginning
- drawing or playing with some other art style - you could do this on your own but get better with help
- rock climbing - you can't do this without help and instruction

Now if you combine these areas with the masks you might be using, externally you might be closer to the center but internally you might be closer to the outside.

Climbing *Sundial Crack* was my mask of ability. I was in the middle because I took an example and performed a task without help but as I mentioned, due to my clouded judgement I was really “here”.

Imagine some of the hardest things you’ve done and where you were on this chart.

Capstones are an opportunity for graduates to show off what they’ve learned but more often, to expose friends, family, and strangers to deep thoughts and beliefs. These presentations are personal and can be very emotional, exposing vulnerabilities that might otherwise be kept hidden.

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### **Safe Space**

Has everyone heard of a “safe space?” Has anyone not heard of a safe space? In outdoor education the group creates the safe space in the form of a Full-Value Contract, sometimes called a community agreement, a document that represents behaviors the group agrees will lead to success and those that are unacceptable.

Creating a Full-Value Contract is a process that involves encouragement, goal setting, group discussion, taking ownership, honesty, and much more. The outcome is a document that represents behaviors the group agrees will allow them to be successful as well as behaviors that the group agrees will be unacceptable and therefore prevent success.

I’ve already exposed myself a little bit, removed a mask, but intend to push further and also ask each of you to join me but I know we haven’t created that safe space. To do that, to facilitate a comfortable, safe-space, I’d like to spend 15 - 20 minutes creating a Full-Value Contract (FVC).

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### **FVC Creation**

1. For framing, keep in mind this *Full-Value Contract* is for this group but might be used or modified in later presentations with the addition of other attendees and/or list of needs. This is a contract of expectations of the presenter, attendees, the group as a whole, and between each of those pieces.
2. Let’s start with positive behaviors/attitudes that will help the group succeed. Are there any pieces or goals as, audience members and future presenters, that you would like to include? compassion, trust, on time, encouraging, etc.

3. How about negative behaviors/attitudes that could lead to group failure of achieving goals, things we want to avoid: talking behind back, cursing, shouting, being late, etc.
4. Is there anything else that might be missing? Great. Now, how do we uphold the *Full-Value Contract*? To uphold this document, I ask each of us to keep these principles in mind. It's easy to slip back into some of the negative pieces we've listed, I tend to, but what keeps me on track is being approached and discussing things in a respectful manner. I like to or rather *I try to*, confront ideas and not people.
5. Now that we have a decent outline, I'd like to ask each person to agree and commit to live by these principles for at least the duration of my presentation. Thumbs up.

As you have experienced, *Full-Value Contracts* are complicated and as you can guess, *Full-Value Contracts* evolve as the group develops and it can take a while to create the first one, sometimes hours or days. This *Full-Value Contract* is a great start and has truly become a behavior contract for every member of this group. As I mentioned earlier, I believe a few of my colleagues will be using this community agreement as a tool to bring about transforming learning experiences so I want to thank you all for creating this.

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### ***Fake It Til You Make It and Masks***

This graduate program is very unique and starts with a year-long residency on this site. The program is heavily influenced by the seasonal changes as each term focuses on a different component of the environment we live in, while combining classroom learning and hands-on, field-based teaching experience.

One thread that stayed through the entire program was whittling. I think everyone whittled a spoon; I didn't...I guess I don't like to conform. At one point I was in a bad mood for a week and started carving with the intent to make a mask. I wanted to make a masquerade mask but as the wood began to take shape, it wasn't what I wanted. This piece of wood inherently wanted to be an animal. I fought and carved and tried to force my vision but eventually I gave in and let the animal out.

This experience reminded me of Michelangelo who once said:

*In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.*

When I gave in and saw what the wood was supposed to be, my tension released and my mood immediately got better. I also ended up with a pretty recognizable owl mask.

I met Nick last winter and he started C14 on the process of Transformative Inquiry in which you engage in new activities as an educator to try and expand your way of thinking and being, in educational contexts. I didn't really know what that meant. I still don't but I figured it was an opportunity to examine myself and maybe figure something out or get way more confused that I've ever been.

Last summer I was a wilderness ranger with North Cascades National Park. Apparently, during training in the first few days of the season there was concern that I wasn't going to be a good fit. During my exit interview I was told I my initial impression could be a barrier to employers and I was hired because of a reference who said "it will take time for Kevin to open up but once he does, he's great."

The experience of carving that mask, progressing through the Transformative Inquiry, and the conversation with my boss precipitated my interest in self-expression, openness, and presentation of self. For a portion of my Transformative Inquiry, I drew pictures in ten minute chunks while trying to solely ponder my topic, then explained how they related to my process. The first thing I learned was it's really hard to think of only one thing, especially when that thing is SUPER vague.

- This first one is a little obvious. I was thinking about masks, both physical and non.
- This second one is not obvious. I was thinking about the relief and ease I felt when driving back to Portland and seeing Mt. Hood. Although I was born in Portland, it was the first time I had a symbol of home.

Over ten weeks of class, after hours of conversation and even more introspection, I ended up with a 20 minute presentation/activity on my inquiry...here's what I did.

There were 14 of us and after spending 15 minutes discussing the role of masks, I did something I've never done...I removed all my masks and allowed everyone present, some I knew very well and some I didn't know at all, to ask me any question and receive fully-truthful answers.

It was really powerful: I cried, which is uncommon for me in public and I hugged some people, which is even more uncommon. A few weeks later I received a letter. The subject was "The Mask That Stays..."

*Hi Kevin,*

*Your presentation has stayed with me like few have. I had no expectations of what your inquiry would look like as I do not feel that we had really gotten to know each other over the course of the class. After your presentation however I was impacted in ways that I was not expecting. I will not soon forget the experience of getting a glimpse of the elusive man behind the mask. I really appreciate your method of presenting your inquiry for us and have taken much of to heart.*

*I have since, really enjoyed speaking with you and getting to know you better. I wish you*

*all the best in your coming adventures and any future furry friends that are lucky enough to find you.*

*May you find quiet joy in all you do.*

Going through the inquiry process and the experience of being 100% open and vulnerable was scary, terrifying...it still affects me, but it was also enlightening. I'm not going to be doing this vulnerable activity because the Full Value Contract our class had in place was built over ten weeks and for some of us, over a year. That said, I am going to leave time at the end for each of us to engage with our masks but that doesn't mean I'll be asking anyone to do that activity or even share.

Before that, how is all this information of masks and Full-Value Contracts relevant to outdoor education? I've already said I believe relationships must be built on trust and honesty. The principles of outdoor education go beyond trust and honesty in positive group dynamics, they require trust and honesty because participants are often holding each others' lives in their hands.

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### **Potential of Outdoor Education**

Outdoor education has the potential to engage participants on significantly deeper levels because so much time is spent together in remote areas bonding, growing, learning, and having a shared experience. This is Pamela Lake in 2007, my first multi-day experience in a wilderness setting, with my first outdoor education cohort. I learned how to make and break camp multiple times, navigate off-trail, yeast bake, and more importantly, start to understand my own philosophy and build a community.

Groups, cohorts, and communities go through a process of forming (meeting each other), norming (start to figure each other out), storming (start to not like each other but work through issues), and eventually performing (peak group cohesion and functionality) based on the foundation of openness, inclusion, clear feedback, and debriefing.

The learning isn't necessarily getting the hard skills perfect, tying this knot, setting up that tent, identifying that bird, it's that you're learning how to express yourself. You're learning what your own masks mean and figuring out if and when to use them.

These skills take as much or more effort build than hard skills. It is a lifelong process to try to understand the intricacies between yourself and the world. To acknowledge the learning that comes from figuring out your own masks is to grow as a person.

Showing vulnerability is powerful and acknowledging masks doesn't devalue outdoor education.

- Being truthful and honest allows you to express yourself and relate with others.
- Being open and vulnerable allows you to experience more.

These are tools to create better experiences. I'm not saying you should always and constantly expose your heart, mind, thoughts - sometimes have to fake it to make it - but I believe those concepts...trust, honesty, openness, vulnerability, and the principles we used and identified in creating in our FVC can help us cultivate stronger relationships.

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### **Reflection and Processing**

We don't often use Full Value Contracts but when we do, we usually don't do them very well. I've already mentioned capstones are personal and can involve removing masks for a time. I encourage each of you to continue thinking about what you've heard but please keep our community agreement in mind; it would be inappropriate for me to leave this room and share your personal stories and vulnerabilities. I'm sure you have thoughts and maybe some questions but if you're like me, you might need at least a little time to process. To help with that, I have some reflection prompts followed by a song. During the song, feel free to write, draw, think, or just listen.

Here are the prompts:

- What masks do you have?
- How do you use masks in your life?
- How do masks help and hinder us?

### **After Song**

- It's one thing to acknowledge your masks
- What do you do with that awareness?



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