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It's Not All About Climbing Rocks: Reorienting Outdoor Educators Toward Social Justice

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Abstract

The field of outdoor adventure education was born in the Western world in the twentieth century because of several specific factors. These factors include, but are not limited to: changing Euro-American attitudes toward wilderness, Kurt Hahn's character education schools and the pervasiveness of white supremacy. Today, outdoor adventure education is widely popular among the white middle class. According to current instructors in the field, outdoor education is for the purpose of individual development, learning in a wilderness setting and teaching students how to be environmental stewards for wild places. These purposes result from underlying, sometimes false, assumptions about the nature of wilderness education and the students themselves. Based on these assumptions, outdoor education – as it is practiced today – perpetuates the oppression it was built on. Dismantling and eliminating this oppression can be started by reframing field instructor training to be less focused on physical risk management and technical skills, and more focused on anti-racist and social justice skills.

Keywords: : outdoor adventure education, social justice, instructor training, wilderness, oppression, anti-racism

This afternoon, I'm going to talk about a topic I didn't really think I would revisit as a master's candidate: outdoor education.

I didn't think I would talk about this topic, because, first, I assumed that people who study outdoor education in an academic setting are those who can't do it. Second, when I came to this program, I thought I was shutting the door on outdoor education to pursue loftier and more academic means of education for the environment. I'll say now I don't believe either of those things anymore.

Before I begin, though, I need to acknowledge that we are gathered here, on ceded and unceded lands, without permission from the peoples who have inhabited this place since time immemorial. The Environmental Learning Center is built on the traditional homelands of the Upper Skagit, the Sauk-Suiattle and the Nlakápmux, among others, and it is essential that we recognize our complicity in perpetuating the displacement of these nations.

I am here, talking about something I didn't think I would be talking about, first and foremost because of who I am. I am a white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, atheist, cisgendered adult woman. All of these pieces of my identity have enabled me to participate and feel welcome in the world of outdoor education. Because I like to hang out where I'm wanted, I've stuck around the field long enough to talk about it today.

I've worked for several outdoor education organizations, each with a different mission but all fundamentally the same in their purpose: to get people outside to learn something. I'll eventually get pretty narrow in my definition of outdoor education, but for now, I'll just make the distinction between guiding and education: I've never been a guide. My understanding of the outdoor guiding world is that guides bend over backwards to deliver an extraordinary outdoor recreation experience, like climbing a mountain or rafting the Colorado River. Guides take care of their guests' every need, from hauling heavy gear to setting up camp to cooking meals. As an outdoor educator, I take my students into outdoor settings and show them how to do everything they need to survive. When my students haul the heavy gear, set up my camp and cook my meals, I know I've succeeded in part of my job.

Back to the point: I've been in outdoor education for a while, and I've gained experience with several different organizations. Each one taught me something different about what it means to be a good outdoor educator.

In college, I worked as a trip leader and warehouse staff in the outdoor program for three and a half years. In this program, where Sharpies and checklists ruled the day, I was trained in logistics, some outdoor skills and more logistics. This was my entrance into the world of outdoor education, and I really thought that being a good trip leader was almost entirely about being a good logistician. I was interested in teaching outdoor skills, sure, but I was convinced that I would be set apart from the rest if I could master backing up the 12 passenger van with a trailer and prove my competence in planning a weekend trip for 10 college students from start to finish. Having an affinity for checklists and organization anyway, I thought I was well on my way to being a super-star in outdoor education.

When I was a student on a National Outdoor Leadership School semester, I learned how to be a leader and an educator from an industry standard-setter. NOLS has been around for decades and has long touted itself as the best in wilderness education. To be a leader from NOLS is to be action-oriented, competent in technical skills and in possession of a group-first mentality. You must be able to juggle many moving pieces at once and have excellent physical risk management skills. As a leader in training, I learned about the importance of giving feedback to my group members, and I (mostly) learned how to run rapids in a tandem canoe. I learned that I should prioritize my audience's comfort in a lesson by positioning myself to stand facing the sun or the wind. Training from NOLS taught me that being a firm, energetic, commanding and charismatic leader was key to being an outdoor educator.

After graduating from college, I took an internship position with Outward Bound in Leadville, Colorado. I was deeply wary of working for Outward Bound because of my experience with NOLS (the rivalry between the two organizations is mostly friendly, but folks tend to clearly belong to one organization or the other). I was skeptical about Outward Bound's reputation for focusing more on emotions. For those of you who knew me at the start of this program, you know I had zero interest in spilling my emotions to people I didn't know.

Outward Bound did push me to talk about feelings and encouraged me to learn "above all, compassion" (one of the tenets of the organization), but the training I received on being a good outdoor educator was conflicting. I was trained to help students develop a deeper self-awareness, but I was rebuked when I shared my life with them. I was trained to teach students that the wilderness setting was almost beside the point in this journey to learn about themselves, and that it didn't matter if they didn't really understand how to live well in the backcountry. I, in contrast, was expected to be an accomplished rock climber and mountaineer to lead an eight-day backpacking trip on marked trails. This tension between what I was trained to teach and what was expected of me was troubling, all the more so because I am not a good rock climber or mountaineer.

Competent logistician; charismatic, energetic, safety-oriented leader and superb rock climber. According to everything I learned up until the summer of 2016, that was what it meant to be a good outdoor educator.

Why was I taught this way?

To answer that question, I looked at how and why the outdoor education field was born in the twentieth century. As I said earlier, the phrase "outdoor education" represents a wide variety of activities and practices. When I talk about outdoor education, I'm (mostly) talking about outdoor adventure or experiential education. This type of education usually features a wilderness setting, a small group of about 12 people, various cognitively or physically challenging objectives, frequent periods of group problem solving or decision making and a duration of several weeks (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997).

In order for outdoor education to exist, European-American attitudes about wilderness had to change. Until the 21st century, "wilderness" was generally perceived to be frightful and bad; it was an uncontrollable environment (Nash, 2001). That began to change as European colonizers multiplied on the North American continent and asserted control over the environment and Native Americans through brutal force. As we colonizers started to feel more comfortable with our grip on the continent, we began to see the "wilderness" as less frightening.

Environmental historian William Cronon (1996) attributes this shift in our views toward wilderness to our fascination with the sublime and the frontier. He argues that as we grew more comfortable with wild spaces, we began to see them as ideal landscapes to seek out God, who was widely thought to be most accessible in beautiful, remote,

terrifying landscapes. Cronon further argued that once we consumed the land in our toxic vision of Manifest Destiny, we turned toward wilderness in some sort of desperate attempt to fill the void left by that heady rush of conquering the frontier.

Dorceta Taylor (2016), another notable environmental scholar, posits that European-Americans changed our minds about wilderness because we forcibly removed Indigenous nations from land we wanted and could then declare that land virgin and pure. This rebranding of wilderness aligns pretty well with our tendency to market the earth as female, and also capitalizes on our centuries-old fetishization of young virgin white women. This concept of wilderness could use of my full hour and longer, so I'm going to move on. Suffice it to say that wilderness is one of the key components of an outdoor adventure education experience, made possible by a dramatic change in European-American culture.

Other common features of outdoor adventure education courses include challenging objectives and frequent, often intense group interactions over the course of several weeks. These features have their roots in Kurt Hahn's philosophy of education.

When I showed up at Outward Bound, the popular narrative of Kurt Hahn among the staff was one of a man determined to rise above Nazism through character education. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Hahn, he is the founder of Outward Bound. He fled Germany as Hitler rose to power and founded several schools in the United Kingdom in the 1930s and 1940s. One history of Hahn's work states the initial aim of Outward Bound courses was to "strengthen to will of young men so that they could prevail against adversity as Great Britain faced staggering losses at sea during World War II." (James, 1995, p. 87). The narrative I heard postulated that Hahn saw old, frail sailors surviving at greater rates than the young, strong sailors in battles at sea and was convinced that the problem lay in the young sailors' characters. The initial month-long Outward Bound course was designed to develop "independence, physical fitness, self-reliance and resourcefulness." (Hattie et al., p. 44). This course model was and continues to be influenced by the militaristic atmosphere of World War II, evident in the "physical hardships, daily routines and exercise, insistence on attention to detail and a steady diet of small triumphs," (Brookes, 2016, Militarism section, ¶ 7) which also feature in military training. This model was also in response to what Hahn saw as "declines of diseased civilization" (McKenzie, 2003, p. 9) manifesting in young men as laziness and lack of masculinity. Hahn sought to rectify the deficits he perceived in youth culture by "ensuring the survival of the qualities of 'an enterprising curiosity, an indefatigable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion.'" (McKenzie, 2003, p. 9).

These two historical conditions – wilderness and Hahnian character education – are woven into a larger narrative at play in the twentieth century. That narrative, the basis for these two conditions and many others, is called white supremacy. When I talk about white supremacy, I'm not talking about individual acts of violence and hate carried out by white people on people of color. I'm talking about the very fabric of our society that

has been crafted on the assumption that to be white, to be male, to be cisgendered, to be able-bodied, to be Christian is to be normal, neutral, objective.

Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, defines a racist idea as one that assumes the superiority or inferiority of one racial group in relation to another (Kendi, 2016). White supremacy is a racist idea because it assumes the superiority of white racial groups over non-white racial groups. I'm going to complicate the definition a little bit by adding that Dr. Kendi uses the term "racial group" in a more complex manner than you might initially imagine. There are many racial groups within the categories of "white," "black," "Asian," etc: there are the white poor, Asian transgender, wealthy black able-bodied, white Christian male and so on. These are all different racial groups. White supremacy assumes the superiority of the groups I mentioned earlier: white, male, cisgendered (which means to identify with the sex you were assigned at birth), able-bodied and Christian. This assumed superiority of white racial groups saturates every aspect of our lives (Apple, 2012), including and especially outdoor education. I will return often to this definition of a racist idea, so I'll repeat it: a racist idea is any idea that assumes the superiority or inferiority of one racial group in relation to another.

While we white people were deciding that wilderness was pretty neat after all and creating educational programs based on militarism to correct the failings of our young people, we were also explicitly continuing centuries of violence against people who did not fit into the white supremacist ideal: people of color, women and genderqueer people, disabled people, non-Christians. For example, Outward Bound ran its first program for boys – all white boys – in 1962. NOLS opened just three years later, in 1965. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing at this time. In between the launching of these two programs, Alabama governor George Wallace was calling for "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever;" (Younge, 2013, ¶ 1) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was writing from a Birmingham jail and black children were being hosed down and attacked in a public park (Younge, 2013).

So, outdoor adventure education was born as a result of many factors, among them changing attitudes about wilderness, the desire to save the next generation of young people from becoming a diseased civilization and the assumption that white peoples' normal was *the* normal, and it was also right. These historical factors matter when we're talking about how outdoor adventure education is practiced today.

In 2018, outdoor adventure education is exploding in popularity. Since its first courses in the 1960s, Outward Bound has opened 16 school locations throughout the country, serving over 35,000 students per year (Outward Bound USA, 2018). NOLS has dramatically increased its enrollment every year for at least the past seven years; in 2016, they served over 26,000 students, which was a 10 percent increase from a record breaking year in 2015 (National Outdoor Leadership School (a) [NOLS], 2016). Colleges across the U.S. host degrees in outdoor education, and here I am, studying it in my master's program.

In writing this paper, I conducted interviews with instructors who have worked at Outward Bound, NOLS and other similar programs. At the end of each interview, I asked the instructors to tell me what they believed to be the purpose of outdoor education. Several spoke about the value of learning self-awareness and confidence through challenge. There was a strong theme, particularly among female instructors, of freedom from traditional gender roles. Many people mentioned the value of learning in wilderness settings. Others talked of creating environmental stewards out of students. One instructor said, “If we’re going to save our earth in any way, shape or form it’s because we find a love for it, so we better be inspiring it in our youth, otherwise we’re kind of screwed” (Anon. (a), personal communication, February 2018).

If these are the purposes of outdoor adventure education, then I conclude that the industry operates on a set of certain assumptions. These assumptions include: Students lack certain character traits deemed valuable by society. Challenge does not exist in students’ everyday lives. Traditional gender roles are harmful. Cities and urban areas are bad. Kids do not know how to be environmental stewards unless we show them. I’m not passing judgement on these assumptions – yet – but these are what stood out to me in listening to the instructors speak.

Operating under these assumptions, and to fulfill the aforementioned purposes of outdoor adventure education, programs might look like the following:

During the 77 days of my NOLS semester, I canoed 112 miles down a river, sea kayaked all over a sound and backpacked 130 miles with eight other group members and rotating groups of instructors. Each section of my semester brought physical challenges that my group and I had to overcome as a team. While canoeing, for example, we had to come up with a plan to safely transport ourselves and our gear around a rapid that we deemed too dangerous to run in the boats. In the backpacking section, we had to climb over a steep, technical rock slope to get into the next river drainage and our resupply point. We rotated through acting as Leader of the Day, in charge of making group decisions, and other group chores like cooks, bathroom tenders and dish cleaners. Our group only saw a handful of other people in the wilderness, and we drove through a town a mere two times in the whole 77 days while traveling between sections. By the end of the semester, I had learned a lot about my physical capabilities, I could replicate a backpacking trip (I wouldn’t quite say the same for white water canoeing or sea kayaking), I made eight new best friends who I promptly lost touch with after the experience was over and I had a pretty good idea of what it meant to be a NOLS educator. I also cried a *lot*, experienced intense emotions ranging from hilarity to exhaustion, walked my feet raw and suffered through some of the most poisonous farts I’ve smelled.

Here’s another example: when I was a field intern for Outward Bound, I led an eight-day backpacking trip for 12 and 13 year olds in the Mount Massive Wilderness Area, just outside of Leadville. On our first full day of course, we cheered or coaxed students up a short rock wall just off the highway. Our next few days were spent backpacking through the wilderness area. We went into lightning drill multiple times on course as thunderstorms rolled overhead, adding a thrilling and somewhat nerve

wracking component to each day. We carried around five necklaces that represented the five tenets of Outward Bound: an indefatigable spirit, enterprising curiosity, readiness for sensible self-denial, tenacity in pursuit and compassion that students awarded to one another at the end of each day. Toward the end of the course, my co-instructors and I roused our students at 12:45 in the morning to attempt to summit a peak along a nearby ridge. After almost eight hours of travel, the students mistakenly identified the peak they had reached as the correct one, and we let them believe it because we wanted to go back to camp and nap. Like me on my NOLS semester, my students also cried, toned their abdominal muscles from frequent laughter, got blisters and expelled some truly terrible gas. I'm sensing a theme here.

These experiences are pretty typical for an outdoor adventure program. Jeff Rose (2012), an outdoor educator based out of Utah, summed it up nicely:

[I believed] everyone [could] benefit from these outdoor experiences and, if more people could see as I do, the world might just be a better place...We were teaching social skills and leadership skills. We were teaching an appreciation for nature and a sense of place. I was certain these were important, lifelong skills everyone should have. (p. 137)

This all sounds great to me – it's certainly why I got into outdoor education. Learning about my capabilities, increasing my self-confidence, seeing beautiful places, all while making new friends and learning new stuff? Sign me up!

There's that old adage, though, that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Using the instructors' stated purposes of outdoor adventure education as a framework, I'll next examine how the field perpetuates the oppression emanating from the structures it was built on.

The first purpose of outdoor education I identified from my conversations with the instructors was that outdoor education fosters individual personal development. One instructor spoke of "the amount of confidence and self-trust and self-worth that are built through...challenging experiences" (Anon. (b), personal communication, February 2018). Research in outdoor adventure education confirms this, too. In one comprehensive study of outdoor education outcomes, researchers identified some of the major outcome categories as leadership, self-concept, personality and interpersonal skills. Under these broad headings were outcomes like improved organizational ability, increased conscientiousness, higher levels of social competence and increased self-efficacy (Hattie et al., 1997).

The underlying assumption of this purpose of outdoor education is that students lack certain character traits and the capacity to develop those traits. Programs develop students' characters by facilitating physical challenges, mediating conflict between group members and fostering leadership in students over the course of multiple days.

This model of developing self-awareness is problematic because social positionality is entirely absent. By social positionality, I mean the power individuals have in a social setting based on their identities like race, gender, class, sexual orientation and more. I was never asked to consider my social identities as a student and outdoor educator-in-training on my NOLS course, but I was taught to admire white environmentalists and wilderness advocates like John Muir. Failing to include social positionality in outdoor education programs assumes that white culture is normal and right, because outdoor adventure education was built and made popular by white people. This is a racist idea. Remember, Dr. Kendi defines a racist idea as one that assumes the superiority or inferiority of one racial group in relation to another. By not talking about race and other social identities on courses, we are perpetuating the assumption that whiteness is “the unmarked category against which difference is constructed.” (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369).

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about: one of the theories of change outdoor adventure education operates on is that putting students in (often contrived) challenging situations in wilderness settings will build cognitive strength and test physical capabilities. Rose and Paisley (2012) write:

Simplified and generalized, privileged people may appreciate many of the traditional challenges and pedagogies of experiential education because we are more likely to live free from many everyday structural challenges, such as institutionalized racism, sexism, ghettoism, classism, ageism, and similar forms of othering taking place through discourses surrounding various minoritized and marginalized populations. (p. 144)

Contrived challenge – like getting up at 12:45 am to summit a mountain – is built into the course because there is an underlying assumption that students do not experience challenge at home, and challenge is good for us. This ignores that white supremacy has created a society in which people who do not fit into the dominant narrative face challenges every day, just to survive.

The second purpose of outdoor education that emerged from my conversations with these instructors was that this type of education creates a positive learning environment in a wilderness setting. The instructors saw benefits in taking students outside, away from their normal home environments, to learn. This is often framed as forming a connection or reconnecting to nature (McLean, 2013).

This purpose follows the assumption that the environments the students usually live in – cities and urban areas – are bad. These places are not natural, and by association these areas encourage students to form bad habits, like addiction to technology or conforming to outdated and harmful gender norms. Outdoor adventure education seeks to solve this problem by removing students from their toxic home environments to learn in a place that is beautiful and pure. Anti-racist education scholar Sheelah McLean (2013) reinforces this idea of nature as a cleansing system by naming it as “a place where white bodies can escape the negative consequences of urban industrialism, and reclaim

identities of innocence.” (p. 360). Wilderness is racialized as pure and white, and urban areas are racialized as non-white and therefore less than pure.

One instructor celebrated the notion that in the wilderness, female students are freed from societal expectations of how they should look, act and behave (Anon. (c), personal communication, February 2018). I agree that in my experience, I have done everything I can to disrupt the concept of what it means to be a woman on course for my students – reveling in greasy hair and dirty clothes, featuring poop in a starring guest role in dinner conversation and talking openly and honestly about menstruation with *all* students, not just the ones who have periods. Even though we allow our students more freedom to be dirty and loud, “heteronormative views proliferate in outdoor education,” as social justice scholar Karen Warren puts it (2016, Constructions section, ¶ 4). We encourage girls to break free of the expectation to be small, quiet and feminine, but we aren’t teaching boys about the toxic power of masculinity. We’re barely talking about transgender and gender nonconforming students at all. Moreover, we’re creating this pseudo-inclusive environment in a wilderness setting, which deliberately does not resemble the students’ home lives, so why would they assume our course’s microsociety applies to their social interactions at home?

I’ve already touched on another reason framing wilderness as this pure, untouched space in outdoor education is problematic: celebrating wilderness erases Indigenous history. We white people tend to think of the brutal takeover of this continent as a thing of the past, something that we, today, took no part in and therefore cannot be held responsible for. I certainly used to think this way, and it is still too easy for me to ignore that I am perpetuating settler colonialism every day I live here. To celebrate wilderness and public lands without even an acknowledgement of why we regulate those lands in the first place is to celebrate a lie.

The appropriation of Indigenous practices in outdoor education is closely related to erasing native peoples from wilderness areas. It is absolutely commonplace to play a name game at the start of a course in which each member identifies their name and spirit animal. Spirit animals often hold deep meaning for Indigenous communities. By forcibly removing Native Americans from their traditional homelands, declaring the land “empty” and then adopting Indigenous practices like spirit animals without consent, we are engaging in what Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck (2012) calls settler nativist fantasies. In these fantasies, we aspire to make ourselves indigenous to the land by removing Native peoples and trying to be “better” natives than they are.

The third purpose of outdoor education that many instructors mentioned, in various forms, was that of teaching students to care for wild places so that they might become environmental advocates or stewards in their home lives. This one is a bit tricky, since historically, these courses have been rooted in education *through* the environment, not *about* the environment (James, 1995). Environmental degradation and climate change were not common topics of conversation when outdoor education programs like Outward Bound and NOLS got their starts. Now that these topics are more mainstream, it is easy to make the assumption that because outdoor adventure education courses take

place outside, they must be doing some sort of environmental work. In my experience, and according to the instructors, this is not consistently the case. NOLS has made some effort to include environmental studies in their curriculum (NOLS (b) 2018), but environmental education is not a consistent part of many adventure education programs. Several instructors told me they frequently engage in environmental education while on course, whether that is teaching students about local flora and fauna, helping students analyze the geography of the landscape they're traveling through or exploring astronomy in the night sky. What they teach and how they teach it, however, is entirely up to them.

Aside from piecemeal lessons in the environment depending on course staffing, the outdoor education field seems to rely on Leave No Trace and constant exposure over multiple days to foster a love of wild spaces in students. Leave No Trace is a set of seven principles – among them “minimize campfire impacts” and “dispose of waste properly” (Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, 2012, ¶ 3) that dictate how to move through wilderness landscapes without causing too much damage to the environment. Using Leave No Trace is a way in which “many [programs] problematically centre ecology in a frame that focuses on the effects of environmental destruction, which depoliticizes and silences primary causes such as colonialism, capitalism and white supremacy.” (McLean, 2013, p. 357). In other words, by focusing on Leave No Trace for environmental education, outdoor adventure programs are teaching students that environmental degradation is the result of the individual, so it is up to the individual to engage in environmental protection. In this way, we teach our students a very specific, narrow-minded view of environmental stewardship that does nothing to empower collective environmental advocacy at home.

Further, Leave No Trace encourages living lightly on the land through the purchase of expensive, petroleum-laden products. These products help us to not hurt the wilderness through which we travel, but remain silent on the environmental degradation and human exploitation that was likely caused to create and ship the products in first place. The policy of Leave No Trace yields unequal outcomes for the racial group that manufactured the products and the racial group that is purchasing and using the products, thereby making it a racist policy.

Outdoor adventure education being for the purposes of learning in a wilderness setting and inspiring environmental stewardship rests on a key underlying assumption: the existence of a nature-culture binary that places people at odds with the environment they inhabit. These two purposes of outdoor education speak to this binary directly in enthusiastically promising to help students reconnect to the land. Sheelah McLean (2013) argues that inviting students to reconnect to the land “without incorporating an analysis of the violent history that led to white-settlers’ illegitimate occupation of Indigenous territories” (p. 359) is problematic, and I agree. This assumption that white outdoor adventure education courses hold the key to reconnecting with nature and solving the nature-culture binary that we created in the first place is a racist idea.

If outdoor education perpetuates white supremacy in all these ways and more, what am I doing here? I don't want to make a living in a field that perpetuates oppression

like this. This is a problem I've been grappling with, because, as I said earlier, I *love* outdoor education!

I've found myself returning again and again to the Cycle of Liberation, a model we studied in class with Dr. Hayes last fall. This model "describes a cyclical process that seems to occur in most successful social change efforts, leading to some degree of liberation from oppression for those involved." (Harro, 2013, p. 618). The Cycle of Liberation acknowledges that the work of ending oppression is never done. Even if we could somehow fix all the problems I just talked about in outdoor education, new ones would crop up. The same could be said for *everything* in this society of ours. That's just the reality. In viewing liberation as a cycle, I believe we are at a point where making significant and immediate efforts to halt oppressive practices is essential, *and* I recognize that any change that happens will never be a permanent solution.

Creating this kind of change in an industry that is deeply embedded with white supremacist beliefs and practices is extraordinarily difficult, and it's a little disheartening to realize that changing outdoor education won't change society at large very much, if at all. I'm only one person, though, and, as Hillary Rettig (the author of *The Lifelong Activist*) advises, "In general, you should focus most of your efforts on one activist movement, and within that movement, one type of activist work." (2006, Part I, Section 8, ¶ 2). Focusing work in this way yields greater potential for change while simultaneously reducing burnout.

To that end, I'm focusing my efforts specifically within outdoor education on the ways organizations hire and train their field instructors. Field instructors are nearly at the end of the power chain in these organizations – they may occupy the largest percentage of staff, but most of them seem to have relatively little leverage to change their organizations. They do, however, have power to influence their students, of whom there are multiple thousands every year. I believe that un-training and re-training instructors is a long, slow, but ultimately effective way to continue to reduce oppression.

There's a piece that comes before training instructors that I don't have much time to talk about but that I would like to mention. Instructors in outdoor education often resemble me in several ways: they are often white, they often have a college degree and they often have some sort of safety net that allows them to choose a seasonal, poorly paid lifestyle. I am not speaking for every outdoor educator – plenty out there do not fit this mold. In general, though, instructors fall into one or more of these categories, and they will continue to do so as long as standard hiring practices are in place. This is important because I can keep advocating for new forms of training all I want, but change won't happen very much or very fast if we keep hiring the same kinds of people over and over and over.

Once instructors are hired in any given organization, they typically go through a training period of two to four weeks with a combination of field- and classroom-based work. According to my interviews with the instructors, the topics most heavily covered in instructor trainings, in general, are physical risk management and technical skills.

I am adding specificity to this language: in my interviews, instructors usually just referred to “risk management,” leading me to clarify that they meant physical risk management, rather than emotional risk management. Another common practice is to refer to technical skills like rock climbing, white water rafting or mountaineering as “hard” skills and interpersonal skills like communication and conflict resolution as “soft.” These practices make me cringe because they privilege physical wellbeing and prowess over cognitive health. I will therefore refer to these as “physical risk management” and “technical skills.”

Trainings for new instructors at organizations like Outward Bound or NOLS cover a ton of information in their short training periods. The majority of instructors I talked to said that physical risk management and technical skills were given top priority and interpersonal or student management skills were given a day or two at most, if they were mentioned at all. From a status quo perspective, emphasizing physical risk management and technical skills in instructor training makes sense. Instructors take on responsibility for the lives of other people’s children in areas far removed from the conveniences of modern society, like hospitals. In today’s lawsuit-happy culture, it’s not a great leap to understand why outdoor education organizations want to prioritize keeping the kids in one piece. In order to keep kids safe, the instructors have to really know what they’re doing on that rock face or in the rapid. I understand why we do it that way, and, as I’ve already said, maintaining the status quo is racist.

Nearly every instructor I spoke with said they would have liked to have had further, deeper training around providing emotional support, mentoring students and managing behavioral issues. The nature of these courses is such that students may share deeply personal information, which instructors are often not trained to handle. One instructor said, “[When] things like sexual assault and rape [came up]...I didn’t feel comfortable handling those conversations” (Anon. (d), personal communication, February 2018). It is not acceptable to promote a course culture in which students feel comfortable sharing personal information without preparing instructors support those students.

Environmental education training is merely given lip service or is entirely absent, if my instructor interviews are anything to go by. Most instructors said “none” when I asked what formal trainings they had engaged in around environmental issues, and highlighted what they did instead as individuals. One instructor said, “My co-instructor and I were like, we’re going to talk about [receding glaciers] but it wasn’t something the trainers themselves or the admin had told us to talk about” (Anon. (b), personal communication, February 2018). Another (Anon. (e), personal communication, February 2018) was frustrated with the curriculum provided, saying:

I think when you’re at the point where you’re at a professional outdoor education program, even without an environmental education focus, everyone should probably be able to answer [questions like] how water shaped the area...if that’s the best content you have for the [program]?...That’s what I was disappointed by.

I asked instructors what training, if any, they had received related to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion, including any training on how their personal social identities affected how they taught students. With the exception of one instructor, everyone said “none.” These organizations are not asking their instructors to consider how social identities like race, class and gender shape student (and instructor) experience.

The conversations I had with the instructors reflected my own feelings and memories of instructor training at Outward Bound in particular. My experience was that too much importance was placed on my ability to climb rocks, rather than my abilities to teach and support students in their development. No consideration was given to my abilities as a white girl to facilitate culturally responsive courses for students whose backgrounds differed from my own, but I can't say that was something I was thinking about at Outward Bound, either. After a season of being a field intern, I applied for an assistant instructor position and was told I couldn't be an instructor because I wasn't a skilled enough rock climber. When I pressed my case, arguing that I didn't need 20 trad climbs to lead 12 year olds who may or may not actually climb rocks on course, the staffing director hemmed and hawed and hedged until I gave up and withdrew my application. I ended up taking a logistics position for the summer, probably in hopes that I could somehow show them I could earn an instructor position. I felt intense shame about not being “good” enough to be an instructor. I still feel shame when I tell people I worked at Outward Bound, when they inevitably follow up with, “Oh cool, you were an instructor?” and I have to say, “Actually, I was a field intern and then a logistics coordinator.” The emphasis on being technically skilled is so strong at Outward Bound that even now, three years later, telling anyone that I was a logistics coordinator rather than an instructor feels like shouting out my shortcomings.

So, where do I go from here? Like I said earlier, I thought I was done being an instructor in outdoor education when I came to grad school, but I'm still talking about instructor training now because a) I'm apparently still frustrated with Outward Bound and b) I think outdoor education can be better. I want to work to make it better.

Youth Leadership Adventures, NCI's summer outdoor expedition program for high school students, is heading in the right direction. It's not perfect – nothing is – but the two week instructor training I participated in last summer was a lot closer to my ideal of training than I'd experienced before. Part of that success comes from the structure of the program: Youth Leadership Adventures was constructed on the assumption that marginalized or minoritized groups of people – people of color, gender nonconforming folks, immigrants, low-income students – do not have the same access to public lands that middle class white people do, and the program aims to narrow that access gap. Our training as instructors reflected this assumption – we covered physical risk management and technical skills efficiently, leaving most of the two weeks to talk about our own identities as instructors, how to support students whose backgrounds differed from our own and environmental topics like climate change in the North Cascades. It was a novel experience!

If you asked me what my ideal training program would look like, or what the perfect instructor would know or say or do, I couldn't tell you. I have an incredibly difficult time imagining organizations like Outward Bound taking something like this capstone presentation seriously, or at least seriously enough to take action. It's hard for me to get beyond that assumption to start dreaming.

There is no right way to begin this work. I think the best way is for organizations to just start *doing* the work in whatever way they can, learning as they go. This might mean changing instructor hiring practices. It might look like reconsidering organizational missions. It might involve laying the groundwork for meaningful and lasting relationships with local indigenous groups.

I do know that I want to see more anti-racist education in outdoor education, and in instructor training specifically. If a racist idea is one that assumes the superiority or inferiority of one racial group in relation to another, an anti-racist idea assumes the equality of all racial groups (Kendi, 2016). Anti-racist instructor training might begin by instructors acknowledging that outdoor education as it is practiced today is racist. White instructors in this majority-white field have a responsibility to acknowledge that we benefit from the way our racial group has constructed outdoor education, from operating programs on stolen lands to the use of contrived challenge as a pedagogical tool.

I, myself, might not be going back into the field as an instructor for some time. I am beginning a new position as a program coordinator for a high school wilderness science education program, which offers tuition-free wilderness science programs for high school girls. I am thrilled to be working for a program that provides opportunities like this free of charge.

I am both nervous and excited to leave the environment in which I have ready access to friends and mentors who push and support me in my own anti-racist education every day. I am nervous because it would be all too easy to stagnate and avoid confronting how I perpetuate white supremacy, both in and out of my professional life. I am excited because I want to challenge myself to practice anti-racist outdoor education in a new environment. It's a messy, uncomfortable and lifelong process, but it is essential work, and I am ready for it. Thank you.

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