A Model Theory of Outdoor Programming Approaches

By

Ron Watters

Professor Emeritus of Outdoor Education
Former Director, Idaho State University Outdoor Program

Abstract

To better understand the field of outdoor programming it is helpful to categorize different approaches employed by varying service delivery entities into distinct models. The differences and similarities that exist among programs have been used to delineate programs into four models which form the basis of this paper. The use of model theory makes it easier to make philosophical and functional comparisons of the operation of programs.
CLUB MODEL

Clubs are the oldest form of organized outdoor recreation programming. While great differences exist from club to club, the basic format consists of some type of club constitution or organization by-laws, officers to provide overall leadership, and membership requirements, and usually the payment of a yearly membership fee. Some clubs may be restrictive in their membership. For instance, the American Alpine Club is limited to those who can demonstrate solid mountaineering experience by listing various climbs and expeditions. Additionally, they must be duly recommended by existing members. Others, like American Whitewater Affiliation, simply accept anyone who puts down his or her membership fee.

Outing clubs organized on college campuses are common, with the older, well-established Eastern institutions having clubs that go back many years. Dartmouth Outing Club, Harvard Mountaineering Club, and Hoosier Outing Club are a few examples. It is difficult to pin down the number of collegiate outing clubs since some clubs come and go from year to year. One survey conducted on college outdoor programs in the Pacific Northwest found that approximately 15 percent of the programs surveyed were of the club format. (1) It is likely that the percentage is higher among Midwestern and Eastern universities where they typically have more clubs and they have been around longer.

Some noncollegiate clubs date back to the late 1800s and have had long traditions of providing organized trips and outings for members. A number of these clubs, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and Audubon, also took active roles in trying to preserve important parts of American wilderness and wildlife habitats. The Sierra Club is so identified with its environmental activism role that many do not realize that the club places equal importance on providing outdoor recreation opportunities, as evidenced by its preponderance of outings offered each year. (a)

As long as a collegiate club has energetic leaders and/or advisors, it can be successful in providing enjoyable and fulfilling experiences for its membership. If, however, strong leadership is lacking, clubs often limp along providing little if any benefits. Criticism of the club approach also centers around its structure. Gary Grimm, who, was the previous director of the University of Oregon's Outdoor Program complained that, "Most of the old outdoor clubs, furthermore, which have been around for twenty years or so are so traditionally regimented and organized that many positive reinforcers ordinarily available to a group on an outing are negated by administrative authority or artificial rating systems, or awkward, inefficient, and sometimes damaging teaching techniques." Be that as it may, many remember their outing club experiences as a very enjoyable part of their college days.

EDUCATIONAL/SCHOOL MODEL

This model is a familiar one: a designated instructor or professor teaches a group of students. Some form of informal instruction in club organizations has existed for many years, but formalized approaches in universities, public schools, and commercial outdoor, schools is a more recent phenomenon.

Examples of commercial and nonprofit outdoor schools include Outward Bound (with its several regional locations), National Outdoor Leadership School (based in Lander, Wyoming), Wilderness Education Association (based in Driggs, Idaho), American Avalanche Institute (based in Wilson, Wyoming), and the list goes on and on.

Some of the schools, i.e., American Avalanche Institute, concentrate on particular topic areas. Other schools are more general, like Outward Bound, and provide instruction in a variety of skills and knowledge in the outdoor field.

On the college and university level, this model is found in a number of schools in which classes are offered for credit in outdoor activities. Physical education or recreation departments may offer a class or two in such activities as backpacking, cross-country skiing, etc. On the other hand, other schools, such as Eastern Washington State University at Chaney, offer an entire degree program of an extensive series of classes in outdoor recreation leadership.

Another form of educational/school model is nonacademic workshops and clinics offered by outdoor recreation programs on college campuses. The workshops and clinics are not offered for credit, but the instructor-student structure is present and
PACKAGED/GUIDED MODEL

Guided trips are available from a great variety of companies. These trips may include guided adventures down wild rivers; guided climbs of notable peaks such as McKinley, Rainier, or Grand Teton; guided backcountry ski hut tours; guided canoe trips through the Boundary Waters; etc. Guide companies range from Rocky Mountain River tours, a small, family-owned outfit which guides six-day trips down Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon, to the corporately owned Sobek, a large guide and booking operation that publishes a glossy, four-color book with guided adventures available to all corners of the world. Another company, Return to the Earth Travel Associates, offers a variety of alternative trips. One example is a journey to west Africa to visit witch doctors and voodoo priests. (4) There is some overlap between the guided model and instructional model. Some companies, such as Nantahala Outdoor Center in Brycan City, North Carolina, offer both purely guided trips as well as special classes and clinics which are highly educational.

The guided trip model is also found on the university level. Some Outdoor programs advertise and run “packaged” trips. For a certain sum of money, participants can sign up and go on a backpacking trip to the White Mountains. Transportation and food are provided as well as a person who will be leader and guide the party. For this paper, this form of a guided trip will be termed “packaged trip.” Other authors have used different terms. Greg Blaesing in his article, “A Continuum of Outdoor Program Delivery Systems,” called it “canned programs.” (5) Tom Whittaker referred to it as “travel club programs.” (6) The characteristic of a packaged trip is the payment of a fee for a guided venture. The fee is paid for the purpose of participating in a recreational trip as opposed to being a pupil in an educational class.

SURVIVAL MODEL

This approach to outdoor programming is more of a subcategory of the instructional school approach or adaptations of other models. Since it receives notoriety, through such diverse media forms as the movie Deliverance, it is worth some discussion.

In the survival model, participants are exposed to some preplanned stress, namely, surviving and living off the land for a period of time with limited tools of civilization. A survival program, which was developed by Larry Dean Olsen at Brigham Young University in Utah, placed students in a desert environment. With knife, a few matches, and little more than the clothes on their backs, they constructed snares and traps, ate edible plants, and slept in shelters improvised from natural materials.

The intended result of survival programs is to increase a person’s outdoor and woodsman skills. Some survival proponents submit that, from the confidence gained by overcoming natural obstacles, a person increases his ability to cope with life’s stress. Indeed, this same sort of sociopsychological self-improvement argument has been advanced for other outdoor programming models. Outward Bound chief among them. Olsen says, in his book, Outdoor Survival Skills, that “in survival he can rise above and establish priorities which not only insure my survival but grant me the added qualities of confidence and serenity as I attempt to exist in my environment. Even when the going gets tough and death becomes a grim possibility, that confidence and serenity never leave, thus struggles become challenges and my mind is better able to function without fear or panic.” (7)

Some outdoor programming professionals find such thinking alarming. In fact, the survival approach to outdoor education is nearly as controversial as certification. Some argue that the capricious nature of wilderness and its potential risks are enough of a challenge without adding artificially imposed risks. Others argue that participants in such programs are exposed to a negative form of experiential education, rather than positive. One of the positive aspects of wilderness recreation is the appreciation of nature. How can a person in a survival program—the question is posed—appreciate a sharp-tail grouse or a deer in a meadow when they are thought of only as a potential meal for an aching stomach?

COMMON ADVENTURE MODEL
In its purest form, common adventurism is a group of individuals who combine together, share expenses, and go on a trip. No one is paid to lead them. Decisions are made by a friendly "give and take" process among the group. Common adventure trips do not require a sponsoring institution or agency. In fact, common adventure trips had been going on long before institutions started sponsoring them in the late 60s. It happens over and over when two or more friends take off together and go skiing, hiking, canoeing, or partake in any other outdoor activity.

When a common adventure trip program is part of an offering of an outdoor program, it consists of several elements. The trip is usually announced by means of a sign-up sheet with information on where the trip is going, how difficult it is, what the dates of the trip are, etc. This sheet is posted by a "trip initiator," the person who came up with the idea and who would like to have some company with him. The "trip initiator" is not the same as a "trip leader." The initiator simply gets the trip started. Leadership of the common adventure trips are handled by democratic processes among the group.

Before the trip goes out, a pretrip meeting is usually held in which the participants discuss the trip, figure out what group equipment is needed, and make other plans. While the trip is underway, everyone pays equally-sharing the gas expenses for vehicles, sharing food expenses, and sharing any other group expense, such as campsite fees, group rental equipment, etc. No one is paid by group funds to be a guide, nor does anyone go free because he organized the trip.

Various individuals--Grimm, Hilbert, Simmons, Whittaker, Blaessing, and Mason--have described the concept. Mason, who assumed Grimm's position at the University of Oregon, describes four elements of the philosophic foundation of Common Adventure Outdoor Programs: instructional, economic, participatory, and administrative. (8) Instructional philosophy includes the use of "positive reinforcement" where those sharing knowledge act as "peers" rather than "highly advanced instructors rationing out their knowledge." Participants in common adventure programs decide what and how fast they will learn rather than the instructor making those judgments. According to Mason, the instructor serves as a resource person, minimizing wordy explanations and maximizing the actual "doing" of the activity. Participants learn by doing and experiencing the activity rather than sitting in classrooms. After learning new skills, participants, in turn, become resource people who share their new skills and knowledge with others.

Mason's second element, economic philosophy, is the provision of "maximum access to the wilderness and wilderness pursuits at the lowest expense possible for both the individuals and the institution." By use of volunteer instructors who share their skills and knowledge without pay, and the sharing of trip expenses, the costs to participants are smaller than those of any other outdoor programming model. The costs to the institution are also small, since the "outdoor program budget goes for operating and administrative expenses, not for the actual trips."

The third element of Mason's philosophical foundations is an open participation policy in which there are no membership, age, sex, race, student, or economic requirements. Some individuals, who coordinate common adventure programs, may take issue with Mason's open age, pointing to a basic common adventure assumption that all individuals understand and participate fully in the process. From a pragmatic point of view, those under the legal age of consent have been repeatedly interpreted by the courts as not having the same capabilities of understanding as adults.

Mason's last philosophical foundation is administrative. Among the several areas covered by Mason is the role of the coordinator of the program. The coordinator is a "facilitator rather than a director, in a supportive rather than an authoritarian role." The coordinator does not "lead" trips. "He is free to take out any trips he wishes to, but this is done as a program participant, rather than as the coordinator."

The common adventure model has generated its share of criticism. It is interesting, however, to note that to date little information on the model can be found in outdoor programming literature. Arguments against the concept largely occur at conferences and discussions among professionals. Moreover, the idea of democratic leadership of trip, a central concept in the model, is debated in wider circles than outdoor professional gatherings. Expeditionary mountaineers, river runners, explorers, and even the military debate the pros and cons of how leadership should be structured. (b)

The idea of shared learning is also criticized. Many feel that common adventure learning is slow, disorganized, and not effective. A well-organized, designated instructor, it is claimed, with a structured teaching approach, can be far more
instructor, it is claimed, with a structured teaching approach, can be far more effective in teaching individuals outdoor skills.

Another argument is that there are no checks and balances for the unsafe ego-motivated individual who puts up sign-up sheets. Such individuals could place people who sign up for trips in dangerous predicaments. Common adventure advocates counter by saying that ego-trip initiators just don't survive. Common sense among those on the trip and group processes quickly identify such people. Those in common adventure programs report no major problems because of such individuals, and they add that such individuals are just as likely to show up in other forms of programming.

In actual practice, various modifications are often made to help stimulate common adventurism. Jim Rennie, from the University of Idaho, pointed some of these out in a paper titled the "Uncommon Adventure," presented at the 1984 Conference on Outdoor Recreation. Rennie lists various means which are used to help stimulate trips, including using paid staff to initiate trips, or offering trip initiators free rental equipment. Though these modifications are not necessarily wrong, Rennie feels that it is important for programs to recognize that in practice a common adventure trip can often differ from its philosophical pure form. How much it differs can be illustrated by the use of a continuum. However, before entering into the discussion on continua, the four models are summarized.

SUMMARY OF MODELS

Following is a summarization of the essential elements found in each of the four outdoor programming models:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Essential Elements</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Club</td>
<td>Club constitution or organizational guidelines. Officers to provide leadership. Membership requirements, usually dues.</td>
<td>Harvard Outing Club Dartmouth Outing Club Sierra Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional/School</td>
<td>Designated instructor or professor teaches a class, workshop, or clinic. Classes either offered free or fees or tuition charged</td>
<td>Outward Bound National Outdoor Leadership School Eastern Washington University Outdoor Recreation Leadership Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided/Packaged</td>
<td>Designated guides lead guests or clients on trips. Trips either offered free or fees charged</td>
<td>Rocky Mtn. River Tours Sobek Mountain Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Adventure</td>
<td>No designated leader. Trip expenses are shared by all participants.</td>
<td>University of Oregon Outdoor Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DEFINING MODELS BY USE OF A CONTINUUM

Outdoor programming models, like models in other disciplines, cannot easily be defined in neat packages. Each model exists in different forms. Yet each identifies with one particular approach. For instance, Rennie has described relative degrees of common adventurism. The same is true for clubs, instructional programs, etc. To help show the differences between the various models, Blaesing used a continuum (10) which was based on the structure of trips either participant-initiated or organization-initiated. For this discussion, the following continuum will be utilized which resembles Blaesing’s, but has been modified to represent a more accurate picture of the models described within.
Common adventure programs (c) are placed on the far left side of the continuum, representing participant or largely participant-originated trips. However, as Rennie has described, pure common adventure approaches are rare and the sponsoring program may provide incentives to encourage trips and activities. Common adventure programs, thus, may have several degrees of increasing organizational control.

Club outdoor activity programs are placed to the right of common adventuring. Some clubs run trips which organizationally are very similar to common adventure trips, i.e. trips initiated by club members, with everyone on the trip sharing the trip expenses. Blaesing Places this type of club into a separate category which he calls "coordinated outing clubs." As more control is placed on the club trips by the club leadership or school advisor, its level on the continuum moves to the right, toward more organizational control.

The instructional/school model is next to the right entry on the continuum. In the instructional model, a teacher or leader is designated by the sponsoring organization. It is his or her duty to organize or help organize learning sessions and trips. If the instructor includes students in the organization process, then the school would be located more to the left than in a school in which an instructor did all the planning.

The right side of the continuum is occupied by the guided/packaged model which in some situations represents programs each have total organizational control of activities. For instance, many Western and U.S. river guides do all the cooking, cleaning, and running of rafts, while the guests or "dudes" simply sit and go for the ride. Other guide operations invite more participant involvement, which would place such operations more to the left on the continuum.

**TWO-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH MODEL**

Blaesing's continuum can be expanded to a two-dimensional scale to make additional comparisons between models. Each comparison is based on an isolated component which is common to all.

The first component is leadership:

Figure 1 illustrates that, with increasing organizational structure, trip leadership tends to become more autocratic. Such a trend is only logical. The greater the role of the sponsoring organization the less input participants have in the process. A totally democratic trip is one in which all trip participants have equal voice in all trip stages from trip initiation to post-trip activities. The totally democratic trip is the purest form of common adventure. In practice, it is difficult to attain since some trip members may play varying roles of lesser or greater amounts of participation.

One should also remember that the different models overlap. No clear-cut boundary can be established between them. Some club approaches to trips may be less autocratic than some common adventure trips or some instructional trips may be less autocratic than clubs approaches, and so on.

Cost is the second component which can be compared:
As expected, cost increases with increased organizational structure. Guided trips, because they are generally sponsored by a commercial enterprise designed in most situations to create a profit for the owners, are obviously the most costly type of trip. It should be noted that, although the trend represented on the graph is accurate, exceptions exist.

The last element which will be compared is liability:

**Figure 3 Relationship of liability to different types of outdoor programming models.**

Very few court cases are available to serve to document the above graph, but based on work by Wyman, Soule, Carter and others the trend, at least in theory, is supported. Liability, as portrayed, increases with greater organizational control. The greater the control, the higher the standard of care expected by the participant. This assumes that the individuals participating are adults. The liability picture becomes more complicated when children are participants. With children, liability may show little difference, between the different models.

**BLENDING MODELS**

Programs often blend two or more models in an activity offering. For instance, the University of Montana has a common adventure trip program which involves a significant number of students each year. Yet, Montana also has a number of packaged trips with designated guides or leaders. Some students prefer the self-initiated common adventure trip, while others prefer the security of a designated leader and a set cost for the trip.

As another example, Idaho State University has an extensive, common adventure trip program, but it is supplemented with an instructional program. The instructional program consists of a variety of classes and workshops, many available for credit. Depending on location and the population it serves, a program may provide the best activity offering by incorporating one or more models. It is a matter of constant evaluation and willingness to meet the changing needs of its participants.

**ENDNOTES**
Sierra, the Sierra Club's bimonthly magazine, runs a multipage listing of club trips at least once a year.

Many World War II GIs would agree that their collective dislike of General Douglas MacArthur was due to his authoritarian form of leadership. Indeed, it is possible that attitudes of the GIs, a completely different breed from World War I soldiers, and their dislike of authoritarian leadership were later echoed by their baby-boom sons and daughters through the common adventuring form of outdoor leadership. Nevertheless, opponents argue that lack of a designated, experienced leader is unsafe.

Instead of the term “common adventure,” Blaesing uses “Cooperative Wilderness Adventure.”


Jonathan Carter, “Memorandum in Support of Motion for Summary Judgement” Shelley Walsh vs. Idaho State University, ASISU Outdoor Program, December, 1984. Carter, an attorney, used additional common adventure legal arguments which resulted in a judgment favorable to the sponsoring institution.

Others who have suggested this same relationship include Improta (in Proceedings above), Whittaker, and Blaesing.

REFERENCES

5. Blaesing, p. 47.

Top of Page