

Redefining Risk:
A Critical Analysis of Cornell Outdoor Education

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Outdoor Education has been an avenue for people to explore their skills, leadership, and emotions in an outdoor setting. This form of education harnesses the uncertainties of outdoor activities and the environment, challenging the learner to embrace opportunity. However, we live in a society that tends to seek security and discriminate against risk—behaviour which leads to missed opportunities (Liddle, 1998). Proponents of outdoor and adventure-based experiential education acknowledge that risk is a vital part of the learning process (Brown, 1998; Haddock, 1993; EONZ, 1996; Liddle, 1998; Zink and Leberman, 2001). It is therefore crucial that providers of outdoor education seriously address risk to create a safe and challenging learning environment. The safety of instructors and students is essential for the survival and societal benefit of outdoor education. As a result, organisations have integrated various forms of risk management into their program.

In the United States, Cornell Outdoor Education (COE) is an adventure-based experiential education program that has stressed risk management since its commencement in 1976. Today, it is the largest and most extensive collegiate outdoor education program in the country, serving the students, staff and surrounding community of Ithaca, New York. Yet, organisations like COE see risk management as a way to reduce incidents and legal liability; instructors and students often do not understand or appreciate risk management. Such issues may arise from a problem in definition. Should providers and stakeholders of outdoor education programs redefine risk in a more positive framework? Risk should be redefined as a social process to include potential benefits and opportunities. This change in perception has the potential to improve outdoor education programs such as COE. After outlining the methods of my research, I will define risk in its traditional context and its implications in current risk management.

Subsequently, I will critically analyse this traditional idea of risk in the outdoor education arena and support new perceptions in relation to Cornell Outdoor Education.

Participation in outdoor clubs and COE as a student and instructor, I have had to deal with risk management in many forms. I personally see risk management practices as both a hindrance and necessity of outdoor education. As T.J. Brown suggests, there is a need for more research in this field (1998). With various definitions of risk in the field of outdoor education, there has been a movement to adopt a standard definition. However, it is crucial that this definition is an appropriate model. To explore this issue, I conducted research at Lincoln University, collecting a majority of sources from New Zealand. I focused on scholarly peer-reviewed articles and consult books to reiterate definitions. As an instructor for COE, I could access internal reports, documents, and forms to evaluate the program. I also called on my personal experience and opinions as a COE student, instructor, and administrative assistant. In terms of scope, I am concerned with definitions of risk rather than various tools and methods of risk management. Before redefining risk in outdoor education, risk and risk management need to be examined in its traditional context.

Risk is commonly defined as the potential to lose something of value; the loss may be physical, social, or financial (Brown, 1998; EONZ, 1996; Haddock, 1993; Liddle, 1998; Zink and Leberman, 2001). The New Zealand Mountain Safety Council and Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ) use this definition of risk in their publications and practice. It is the most accepted definition in the outdoor education industry and has frequently been framed in terms of rational thinking. Research on risk has focused on utility theories and decision making models. This idea that risk can be assessed by rational decision making is clear by the various attempts to quantify risk (Zink and Leberman, 2001). The trend of quantifiable risk in outdoor education is

apparent in Brown's acknowledgment of the traditional risk equation, the Adventure Risk Exposure Model, and the Risk Control Spectrum (1998). If risk is the potential to lose something of value, what leads to risk?

The New Zealand Mountain Safety Council identifies danger as the cause of risk. Danger is either in the form of perils, "the source of the loss," and hazards, "the conditions which increase the likelihood of the loss" (Haddock, 1993). For example, the peril of rock fall and the hazard of students sitting beneath a cliff may lead to a potential accident. Such risk needs to be identified before they can be managed. Risk can be associated to causal factors concerning people, equipment/resources, or the environment (Haddock, 1993). Human causal factors include medical conditions of students and poor judgement by instructors. When returning from a COE ice climbing trip, my instructor was driving the van across a narrow bridge when she scraped the side of vehicle against the railing—an example of poor judgement leading to a financial loss and slight emotional loss for the instructor, but no injury. Equipment and resources can be a source of risk as well. COE's Risk Management Report outlines an incident where poor clothing during a winter backpacking trip resulted in frostnip on a student's fingertips (Jordan, 2003). Environmental factors, such as avalanches, storms, and rock fall, are a major source of risk in the outdoors. Last year, a COE winter backpacking group had a near miss, or close call, when overnight rainfall and an ice choked river began flooding their campsite (Jordan, 2003). Such risks often arise from multiple factors of human, equipment, and environmental origin.

The traditional idea of risk can also be divided into types. The New Zealand Mountain Safety Council considers three forms of risk: absolute, real, and potential (Haddock, 1993). An absolute risk is "the uppermost limit of the risk inherent in a situation (no safety controls present)" (Haddock, 1993). The real risk is "the amount of

risk which actually exists at a given moment in time (absolute risk adjusted by safety controls),” while perceived risk is defined as “any individual’s subjective assessment of the real risk present at any time” (Haddock, 1993). Proponents of this typology believe instructors should reduce real risk and maintain an emotionally safe level of perceived risk to stimulate learning. Haddock elaborates by illustrating that real and perceived risks should match (1993). The measure of absolute, real, and potential risk reinforces the idea that risk is quantifiable (Zink and Leberman, 2001).

Outdoor education programs have applied the common definition, factors, and types of risk to create risk management systems as, “the systematic application of management policies, standards and procedures to the tasks of identifying, analyzing, assessing, treating, and monitoring risk” (Zink and Leberman, 2001). The lack of an appropriate risk management system can be detrimental to an organisation. The potential for loss is necessary, but actual loss is unacceptable (Liddle, 1998). Accidents attract public attention through media and we live in a society that actively pursues litigation (Brown, 1998). These conditions have led to cases where outdoor education providers avoid some adventurous activities, exaggerate risk, and create complex risk management systems that ignore the objectives of outdoor education.

How does Cornell Outdoor Education see risk? COE acknowledges that risk is inherent in adventure based experiential outdoor program. The Risk Management Report states, “No organisation can ever achieve total control over all the factors that might cause an accident; hazards can be moderated but never eliminated” (as cited in Leemon and Erickson, 2000). I do not doubt the accuracy of this statement—dangers and risks will always be present. Further analysis of this claim reveals a negative perception of risk as the potential to lose something of value. Mark Jordan, the Director of Outdoor Programs and Risk Management, puts this view into the context of risk management:

“The ultimate goal of risk managers and staff is not to assign blame, but to reduce the potential for future accidents” (2002). Again, this relates risk to potential losses. The Statement on Safety Policies asserts that “since our inception in 1976 we have resisted a lengthy list of “rules and regulations,” while keeping safety and risk management central. The most critical factor in safe programming is a good instructor team exercising sound judgement under varied circumstances” (COE, 2004). In my opinion, COE’s method of risk management is necessary and does not limit opportunities for learning. In many ways, we teach risk management at COE. We give students the confidence to pursue outdoor activities on their own by teaching skills and habits such as first aid, leave-no-trace principles, belaying, and swift-water rescue. On the other hand, we spend up to forty five minutes reviewing and filling out paperwork at the start of each course, which can detract from the activity. Furthermore, research by an American industry study by F.E. Bird and G.R. Germaine in 1987 suggests that for every major injury there would typically be ten minor injuries and up to *six hundred* near misses (Brown, 1998). This may or may not be the case, yet COE reported an opposite trend of near misses. In 2003, COE instructors reported 24 injuries, 5 illnesses, 4 near misses, 1 behavioural incident, and 1 case of vehicle damage out of a total of 11,532 participants and 19,892 program days. It does put current trends of incident reporting into question. Underreporting incidents, especially near misses, is a problem at COE and many other outdoor education programs. I, myself, can reflect on a few near misses that I did not report. Yet, “accidents by themselves are a poor indication of an organisation’s general health. ‘Safe’ organisations can still have bad accidents, while ‘unsafe’ ones can escape them for long periods of time” (as cited in Leemon and Erickson, 2000). COE recognises that risk management deals with more than just the prevention of accidents, yet its risk

management reports, incident reports, and release/indemnification forms focus on risk as the potential to lose something of value.

The common perception of risk in the outdoor education arena creates a paradox between risk and opportunity. Jeff Liddle, a guest editor of *The Journal of Experiential Education*, notes that “a paradox of our time is that as a society we seek security at nearly all cost, yet that very security breeds a complacency that seems ultimately to erode our spirit” (1998). We face a trade-off between stability and change. In a lengthy analysis of incident reports from outdoor education providers including Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership School, and the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council, Brown reports the finding that the benefits of outdoor education exceed its low risks (1998). The author does not elaborate beyond this claim and its accuracy is hard to determine, yet it emphasises the perception of contradiction. This opposition is apparent in Brown’s request for a “balanced approach to risk management based on a clear understanding of the nature of adventurous outdoor experiences in terms of the benefits and risks to clients” (1998). The acknowledgement of potential benefits is a move in the right direction, yet risks and benefits are not direct tradeoffs. It is incorrect to frame it as an inherent paradox, therefore a change in definition is necessary.

Zink and Leberman challenge the traditional definitions of risk and risk management with a case study on how New Zealand outdoor instructors describe risk and risk management in their outdoor education program (2001). The authors are, in fact, “risking a debate” by critically analysing and refuting the current idea of risk. The authors propose that risk should be defined as “uncertain outcome with potential benefits alongside the potential to lose something of value” (Zink and Leberman, 2001). By acknowledging the benefits of risk, the authors are not suggesting that risk management should not try to reduce the potential for accidents. Instead, they are asking why risk

management has such a central, yet disconnected role in outdoor education. The definition of risk has to include potential benefits. We do not take risks if it only promises a potential loss; we take risks for the prospect of some benefit. In addition, risk should not be quantified. Are outdoor instructors experts of risk who can quantify levels of real and perceived risk? If so, what unit would you use to quantify risk? When I determine whether an activity's potential benefits outweigh the potential losses, I do not quantify it. Risk cannot be generalised as a simple process of rational decision making.

The process of redefining risk has the potential to benefit outdoor education programs such as COE. Zink and Leberman predict that "broadening the definition and the discussion of risk in adventure education may allow greater recognition of the complexity of risk, and also that risk is a social process as much as a process about rational decision-making" (2001). I agree with COE's value of instructor judgement over strict rules and policies. Yet, this implies greater responsibility on the instructor and indicates the idea that the instructor alone can determine and modify risk by rational decision making. Although rational decision making is still a part of addressing risk, risk management should also be a "social process." Students should have greater responsibility to determine and manage risk. Referring back to the example of a near miss of flooding their campsite, instructors should share their thought process in identifying the dangers and ask students to choose a suitable campsite. In addition, I gave students in my backpacking course greater responsibility in route-finding and campsite selection on the last trip, allowing them to manage the risks themselves in the hope that the students would learn better when slightly out of their comfort zone. This social process can reduce the chance of a potential loss and add the benefit of critical thinking and leadership for the students. If instructors and students cannot assign any opportunities to a certain risk, than they can choose to bypass the risk. Redefining risk in

COE's risk management will lead to a re-identification of risks within each type of activity and situation. Each risk will include potential benefits and losses. Following, this identification, risks will be realigned to match their potential benefits to the objectives of the course and COE. Risk management cannot be taken out of context of the program's goals. Greater involvement of students in decision making will follow. Furthermore, instructors and students may appreciate risk management more if it is aligned with the program's objectives. The potential benefits of redefining risk seem to outweigh any potential losses.

In my critical analysis of the traditional definition of risk, I assessed a variety of sources from highly-qualified and experienced authors. However, I agree with Zink and Leberman that they framed their research and findings on an incomplete definition of risk. I acknowledge that agreement on the definition of risk within the outdoor education industry is important, so attempting to change a standard perception can be disruptive and confusing. In this case, I am confident that the definition of risk should be modified to improve outdoor education. Nevertheless, more research in its implications is necessary. We need to know whether a new perception of risk will influence risk management and programs to lead to increased benefits of risk and a reduction of incidents and accidents.

The standard definition of risk as the potential to lose something of value limits the success of outdoor education. Cornell Outdoor Education and other members of the outdoor education industry should consider redefining risk as a social process that addresses benefits as well as losses. Changing the perception of risk may lead to a stronger link between risk management and the objectives of outdoor education. By questioning the status quo and researching new ideas in the continuous improvement of outdoor education, we can make a greater difference for students and society.

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