

Spiritual Development through Play in the Outdoors: A Look at the Scout Movement

by François Gravelle and Gervais Deschênes

Outdoor education is a constantly evolving field with a broad spectrum of opportunities and challenges for participants. Miles and Priest (1999) suggest that outdoor education has in the past been conceived of as a learning place (natural environment), a subject to be learnt (ecological processes) and a reason for learning (resource stewardship). These same authors suggest that outdoor education should exceed these elements as it can also take place indoors during trip preparation. They insist, as well, that outdoor education must be more than simply bringing a group of students together in a natural environment to study an ecological environment, in the hope, for example, of the students becoming park rangers. It is our understanding that an outdoor education experience needs to be perceived holistically to fully appreciate its pedagogical significance. In considering the impact of outdoor education experiences, in addition to formal learning objectives, one must include informal and even accidental learning.

Miles and Priest (1999) define outdoor education as “an experiential method of learning with the use of all senses. It takes place primarily, but not exclusively, through exposure to the natural environment. In outdoor education the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on a relationship concerning people and natural resources” (p. 111). As part of this learning experience the intent of this paper is to explore outdoor education as an opportunity for participants to experience spiritual development through play within or in relation to the natural environment.

The term spirituality comes from the Greek word “pneuma” and “spiritus” in the Latin

language. Etymologically the term “spiritual” is associated with “breath of life” and the concept of “vitality” with an “awakening of the conscience of self.” Consequently, for the purpose of our paper we will consider spirituality as an “inner-person” experience leading to a better understanding and ongoing transformation of oneself in relation with the unconditional (i.e., with nature) wherein the transcendence of self and nature through the spirit is considered an important element (Waaijman, 1939).

As it is obviously difficult to measure objectively when and how spiritual development will take place with the individual, it is our belief that participants should be provided with the best possible conditions for this type of learning to take place. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to “play” as possibly being conducive to the spiritual development of the inner-person.

According to Ellis (1973) play is based on freedom, creativity and personal evaluation. Play is an activity where players can be freer, more creative and not subject to formal evaluation such as in the structured settings of school or work (Ellis, 1973). In essence, play has an element of culture, which allows individuals to be themselves or, according to Huizinga (1955), to learn to be different while exploring fun and pleasure.

Socrates suggested that learning was in many instances about finding oneself. Play is therefore a prominent learning tool. But for play to do its magic we need to provide participants with the richest possible learning environment, one that allows for freedom, creativity and self-assessment, and where the outdoors or natural environment

will not only offer the physical space and liberty for play to take its course, but can also offer a liberating environment for spiritual development as it allows participants the freedom to explore their inner-person. Play has many advantages to offer participants in this regard:

- Play can provide participants with varied learning experiences, as it can be informal and spontaneous. Lites (1992) suggests that play is a process in which an individual progresses by making decisions and being constantly “surprised” by an ever-changing environment, thus allowing players to evolve towards what they are supposed to be or become.
- Play is a place for imagination, creativity and authenticity, implying a joy of being.
- Play requires taking time to be oneself, discovering new ways of doing things, giving way to grace, gratuity and freedom, and providing an opportunity to develop personal judgment by inventing rules and adhering to them.
- Play provides an opportunity to explore personal possibilities and limits while interacting with friends, realizing that together they can build and accomplish even bigger projects.

It is therefore our belief that spiritual development gained through play in an outdoor environment will help players become more conscious of the potential within their inner-person. It will not necessarily lead players to become more religious in any formal sense, but rather will help them understand the depth of their own spiritual potential.

Spirituality through play will also provide participants with the realization on a daily basis of the importance of others. Play, therefore, favours deep and transcendent experiences allowing for the development of creativity and helping participants to touch base with their true self through their past, present and even future realities.

Now how can one apply this vision to the real world? To illustrate our perspective let us take a quick look at an existing outdoor education program aimed at promoting spiritual development through interaction with nature. The Scout Movement of Canada is presently a part of life for over 100,000 young people and 30,000 volunteers (www.Scouts.ca). Since 1908 scouting has been an integral part of the Canadian culture providing meaningful experiences to youngsters across the country. In its mission this organization incorporates play in the outdoors as key experiences leading to spiritual development (www.Scouts.ca).

The Scout Movement is defined as “a voluntary non-political educational movement for young people, open to all without distinction of origin, race or creed, in accordance with the purpose, principles and method conceived by the founder Baden-Powell” (World Scout Bureau, 1992). Thus, the purpose of the Scout Movement is to contribute to the holistic development of young people towards achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potential as responsible citizens in their own community (World Scout Bureau, 1992).

The Scout Movement is formally structured, as it leads youngsters through a series of stages before becoming full members of this community. Following a probation period, young candidates will choose to make a “Scout’s Promise” leading to a commitment based on personal honour. This “promise” is lived everyday through the scout’s duty to God, to others and to self (www.Scouts.ca).

In essence the Scout Movement is perceived as a school of life widely open to play as a pedagogical tool that allows youngsters to progressively develop into their holistic being (inner-person). The dynamic relationships taking place between youngsters and the outdoors offer opportunities viewed as cornerstones in the Scout Movement, or, as



stated by Baden-Powell, a way to discover their soul.

Inspired by Shackleton, Baden-Powell stated in 1922 that play led to the development of spiritual thinking not solely concerning one's religion, but rather with the total person, both at play and at work. According to Baden-Powell, the purpose of outdoor education is mainly to help participants discover the beauty and greatness of nature. To lose sight of nature is to lose half of the pleasure of life. Life should be considered a game, and teamwork as the great game.

The Scouting approach is focused upon action in natural settings, providing youngsters with a series of clear objectives while leaving room for their imagination to develop their sense of the inner-person. It is designed to be a challenge that is self-chosen, motivated, conducted and celebrated by the scouts themselves. It envisions a pooling of energy from all members and provides both the individual and the group a chance to grow physically, socially, intellectually and spiritually.

The Scout Movement embraces a pedagogical tool aimed at activating young scouts. The emerging process, one that aspires to meet the needs and expectations of young scouts, is in itself a real life adventure. At the root of this adventure lies a dream growing from the scout's imagination. Dreams are the basis of visions leading to actions.

Imagination will transform dreams into concrete projects. By accomplishing these projects, one often exceeds what is originally

expected. Dreams will often materialize within the structures of serious play where the imaginary constitutes social learning. The experience often evolves into reality, helping young scouts build a community among themselves. In essence youngsters are getting, through their imagination, closer to nature, to reality, gaining significant social learning in line with real life situations. At camp, scouts might decide for example to form a council and meet around a large oak tree to discuss the day's crisis or next day's strategy. Independently from its form or shape, play within the outdoors offers the possibility of "freedom of becoming" (Kelly, 1987 p. 17) and is related to a process rather than the final result. Through play activities, action will focus on each scout developing a stronger inner-person within a community setting. Play allows for creativity and social interaction leading to enhanced community living through spiritual development in the outdoors.

Conclusion

In a nutshell it is our firm belief that outdoor education greatly exceeds formal and pre-planned learning objectives. One must consider the importance of informal yet often accidental learning as contributing greatly to the holistic development of the participants. As mentioned earlier, spiritual development is difficult to objectively measure. Therefore specific attention should be devoted to planning an environment and conditions conducive to spiritual development.

Play has many qualities favourable to the development of spirituality. Through flexible, creative and less evaluative activities, play constitutes an ideal setting favouring spiritual/holistic development of participants.

The Scout Movement is a great example of a well-structured community that is helping young Canadians pursue their spiritual development in a structured and yet playful

outdoor setting. Through the concept of the Scouts' "project" it was demonstrated that youngsters could significantly develop socially and personally, and, more importantly, could pursue their spiritual development, leading to the attainment of their personal autonomy.

It is obvious that the use of technology in scout activities is definitely an added value as far as spiritual development and outdoor education is concerned, whether to enhance pre-trip preparation, help maintain a sense of community between scouts locally and around the world, or enhance youngsters' dreams at the root of their projects.

Within an outdoor education program spiritual development can be enhanced in many ways. To set the scene for success in this matter we recommend the following:

- Play is an extraordinary pedagogical tool. To enhance chances of success in relation to spiritual development, one should leave room for imagination, helping participants develop their own story lines as they progress through their outdoor experience. Learning is greatly enhanced if participants engage in a "learning project," making new knowledge alive in their mind.
- Play allows participants to develop a sense of mastery and control within a safe environment. Play activities should be structured in a flexible manner allowing participants to use their creative potential in building their own limitations, rules and sense of success within these activities.
- The learning project should include technology, as it is an extraordinary tool to trigger and sustain imagination, viewed here as an essential ingredient of spiritual development. Through the use of the Internet, participants can for example better prepare themselves for an outdoor activity, discover new techniques or chat with friends and colleagues sharing similar interests.
- To assess outdoor learning experience, consideration should be put on measuring progress of spiritual development. Questions such as "How did you feel during the activity?" "Did you have fun during the activity?" and "What did you learn about yourself during the activity?" could trigger self-evaluation and self-assessment among participants.

Bibliography

- Baden-Powell, R. (1922). *Rovering to Success*. London, Jenkins.
- Ellis, M. J., (1973). *Why People Play*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A Study of Play Element in Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kelly, J. R. (1987). *Freedom to Be: A New Sociology of Leisure*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Lites, W. W. (1992). *Play as a Metaphor for the Process of Perceiving God*. Doctoral dissertation, Louisville, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- Miles, J. C. and Priest, S. (1999). *Adventure Programming*. State College Pennsylvania: Venture.
- Scouts Canada. (2004). *About Us*. Retrieved 5 May 2004 from <http://www.scouts.ca/inside.asp?cmPageID=9>
- Waaajman, K. (1939). "Toward a phenomenological definition of spirituality," *Studies in Spirituality*, 3.
- World Organization of the Scout Movement (1992). *Fundamental Principles*. Geneva: World Scouts Bureau.

Dr. François Gravelle, PhD, is an associate professor in the School of Human Kinetics, (Leisure Studies Program) at the University of Ottawa. Dr. Gervais Deschênes, PhD, is associate researcher at the University of Ottawa. He is also an active leader in the Scout Movement in the Scouts Association in Canada.