

Paul Petzoldt's Perspective: The Final 20 Years

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Paul Petzoldt, who died in 1999, was one of the early pioneers in outdoor education that saw the future need for trained outdoor leaders. Petzoldt honed his ability to teach outdoor leadership education throughout a lifetime of guiding, teaching and writing. In an effort to foster the outdoor profession's rich tradition, portions of unpublished manuscripts, journals, notes and letters written by Petzoldt served as sources for this article. These unpublished records were written during the last twenty years of his life and focus on the process of training outdoor leaders to conduct educational expeditions. The authors chose three interconnected, recurring themes out of a larger body of work that address refinements in Petzoldt's philosophy and methods made over the last twenty years of his life. These refinements include: (a) crucial components in the first 24 hours of an educational expedition, (b) the "grasshopper teaching" method and, (c) judgment and decision-making.

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Introduction

“**N**ow a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code. In the days to come, though my lips were numb, in my heart how I cursed that load” (Service, 1916; *The Cremation of*

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Sam McGee). Paul Petzoldt recited this passage to emphasize that outdoor leaders must make a deep commitment to the groups they lead. Paul Petzoldt died in 1999, and for most of his life he sought to develop, define and teach outdoor leadership skills (Ringholz, 1997). He used subtle (an expressive smile), and not so subtle (kicking “billy cans” in the fire) methods to make his points. No one who learned from him ever forgot the experience. Since his first climb of the Grand Teton in 1924, he developed a desire to teach people as well as guide them through the mountains. As a climber he developed the American climbing commands and the sliding middleman technique to free climbers from being roped continuously. His strength and prowess on rock and snow are legendary (Ringholz, 1997). In every experience, with every person, he refined his understanding of outdoor leadership. During the 1932 K2 expedition he experimented with energy conservation techniques. That expedition also reinforced his belief that poor group dynamics can cause failure to reach a goal. “Expedition behavior,” a well-documented tenet of leading groups in the outdoors, (Drury & Bonney, 1992; Petzoldt, 1974; 1984) was a direct outcome of the 1932 climb (personal conversation).

Paul Petzoldt played an integral role in the development of outdoor leadership in the United States (Ringholz, 1997). Petzoldt held the position of chief instructor for the first Outward Bound School. He left behind one of the most successful outdoor leadership schools in the world, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). After NOLS, he helped launch the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) and in his last few years he formed the Paul Petzoldt Leadership School for youth. He passionately recorded his ideas on outdoor leadership until his death. Petzoldt did not consciously use written theory about education or group development models. Instead, he was a true experiential educator whose theory came from practice. He would try an idea in the field, write it down, think about it, modify it and try again.

Little has been published about Petzoldt's thoughts during the last twenty years of his life. Petzoldt's books, *The Wilderness Handbook* (1974), *Petzoldt's Teton Trails* (1976) and *The New Wilderness Handbook* (1984), provided the general public its first, real exposure to his written word. Following these seminal works, Petzoldt continued to teach, analyze, refine and write. Boxes of old field journals, unfinished manuscripts, letters, speeches and personal notes were pulled from the basement of his home in Maine after his death. These unpublished, historical gems provide a window into his thoughts over the last twenty years of his life. Three interconnected, recurring themes were gleaned from these writings that demonstrated his unceasing drive to explain effective training methods. These themes were aspects of leadership and teaching that are important in the planning and execution of an educational expedition. Petzoldt drilled these themes into potential leaders and instructors. They were (a) the crucial components in the first 24 hours of an educational expedition, (b) the "grasshopper teaching method" and, (c) judgment and decision-making. He emphasized these themes with one simple goal in mind—mind to train leaders to take participants into the outdoors safely and enjoyably. Paul Petzoldt's lifelong commitment to outdoor leadership did not waver from this goal. The following are some of his ideas taken from his unpublished field journals, manuscripts, and speeches.

The First 24 Hours

Ask any outdoor leader about the most intense teaching times in a course and you will probably hear that the first day or two are the toughest. So much is happening. Group members meet each other and gear is issued. The environment and course elements produce student stress. There is an urgency to get to the field and get started. While programs differ in intent and duration, the priorities that instructors establish in the first

24 hours are critical to the success of the program. Petzoldt said it this way, "The first day of any outdoor leadership education program will be a difficult one. There is a temptation for the Instructor [sic] to try to give decision-making [sic] education before going to the field—and perhaps some is necessary. That which is not absolutely necessary should be postponed till actually in the field" (Petzoldt, n.d.). The emphasis Petzoldt placed on not overloading the student with information was central to tone setting. He believed that students should learn from experience as a predictable progression unfolds on an educational expedition. Effective teaching requires setting a firm foundation of expectations, parameters and behavior balanced with the logistics of living in the wilderness. Petzoldt had a clear vision of what instructors should focus on during a course start. He did not care how neat and tidy students were in the beginning. He believed that students should get to the field quickly and instructors should begin the shakedown. He recorded his thoughts this way:

The first day we have done a lot in order to get the expedition started and we've started to develop judgment among the students. If some students are disturbed by fragmented and incomplete teaching of subjects, it may be necessary to explain that education in the outdoors is a continuing process, that subjects are not learned all at once, as chapters are written in a book. They will be learning a little bit about every subject the entire time that they are in the field. Hopefully this will eliminate dissatisfaction with only partial explanations of the various things that they are doing. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

Petzoldt simplified the task of curriculum management by focusing on four priorities. He stressed that these priorities should be considered each day in the field. He stated his perspective by the following, when giving advice to a field instructor:

First we must make decisions (I suggest you take your students along with you on your thinking process and decision-making – thinking out loud to them) for the day considering our four priorities that we take into consideration with every decision:

The first day the leader will need to emphasize the following:

1. The safety of the individual.
2. The conservation of the environment.
3. The protection of the equipment.
4. Expedition behavior.

The safety of the individual. This concerns many aspects of safety such as avoiding blisters, sunburn, insect bites, chilling the body, overheating the body, fatigue, sprained muscles or being separated from the group.

The conservation of the environment. This concerns disposal of human waste, littering, disturbing flora and fauna, polluting water, causing fire or causing erosion.

Protection of the equipment. This concerns keeping equipment dry, avoiding loss of equipment and damage to equipment the first day and night of use. [sic]

Expedition behavior. This concerns loud and boisterous noises, meeting horses, cycles, hikers on trails, avoiding disturbing other users, obeying laws, rules, regulations, avoid disturbing wild life, avoiding conflict within your group, and promoting enjoyment and fun.

Every day we must give priority to making decisions concerning the previously described four areas. Then, after that is done, the rest of our time we will teach the decision making process concerning other aspects of outdoor leadership. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

These priorities shaped the outline of the first day and influenced information shared with students prior to arrival at a course. For example, Petzoldt resisted the temptation to give a full-blown lecture on expedition behavior at the beginning of a trip. He provided information on an “need to know basis” until he could discuss the concept in more detail.

As part of setting tone and expectations, Petzoldt emphasized the necessity of explaining the educational process. As Petzoldt alluded to earlier, students can become disturbed or distressed by not knowing the exact plan and all the facts associated with a subject. In Petzoldt’s later years, he spent significant time in the field with college students, university professors and seasoned outdoor professionals while teaching Wilderness Education Association (WEA) courses. Therefore, to deal with these populations he included in his tone-setting strategy the following advice for instructors:

Explain that there may be many ways to do outdoor skills and teach outdoor leadership. We know one way, one method that has proven to be effective and to accomplish our goals and this way, our way is the one we will teach and use on this expedition. This in no way says ours is the most effective, programmatic or productive way. We know of no ‘best’ ways – since any method can be improved as we hope our method improves and changes to be even more productive in the future.

What we wish to do for you is to teach you our proven way and encourage the development and improvement of your judgment so you can adjust the learning you receive here to the unique situations you will confront later with your own groups in different environments, with different people and with different expeditions purposes. [sic]

Therefore to make our learning most efficient and effective we ask your help in accepting our methods and our teaching on this one and only expedition. After this program or course

you will have complete freedom, on your own judgment, to change what we have taught, add it to your past methods of outdoorsmanship – or dismiss it all together and go back to your previous methods you think more productive.

This understanding about not arguing about mythical ‘best’ ways will be difficult for some to understand or cooperate in keeping their arguments to themselves, especially those with experience who came to the program thinking they know the ‘best’ ways. It will be a blow to some egos to not try and enforce their methods that they think ‘right’ and ‘better’ or ‘only’ ways. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

In order to weave the four priorities throughout a course and build on concepts and skills, Petzoldt believed that a specific style of teaching was needed. Like the students Petzoldt taught in the field, he also found that new instructors were accustomed to teaching information in large chunks, such as the 50-minute college classroom lecture. For example, at the beginning of a course most assume that “how to pack a backpack” should be taught. An instructor will gather the students and give a 45-minute lecture and demonstration on the intricacies of backpacking. The lecture/discussion might be followed by having students pack their own backpacks. Petzoldt gives this advice for the first day on the trail:

Hopefully the group can reach camp without time out for a backpacking lesson. Let them struggle with their packs. Let the packs be sloppy. The first day we must get to the first camp and have time to prepare shelter and food and teach what is essential. We will probably not have time to go into details of how to pack a pack and carry a pack and put a pack on the back or other teachings. All that comes later.

It will probably be necessary to slow down the scout at the head of the line because most people have not been on educational programs. They’ve been on destination-oriented hikes and they have a habit of going as fast as possible to reach a destination. We probably can’t give much of an explanation the first day. We may explain that the first day we want to take a leisurely pace to arrive without fatigue and without blisters. If anything happens along the way appropriate for educational illustrations we will use opportunity teaching. Opportunity teaching will count for a great deal of the education and even on the first day we can seize any opportunity that might develop. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

The “Grasshopper Teaching” Method

As described above, Petzoldt used opportunity teaching to convey information on the first day of a course. Petzoldt spent a significant amount of time in his later years attempting to articulate to instructors what the ideal teaching method was for an outdoor leadership course. He coined the term “grasshopper

method" as a preferred teaching methodology. The grasshopper method of teaching allows an instructor to "hop" from one subject to another as circumstances allow. He wanted an introduction to the subject, a demonstration and practical application in close time sequence for optimal learning of outdoorsmanship (Petzoldt, 1984). This term, grasshopper method, was one of many colorful analogies that Petzoldt coined to grab the students' attention. He was a master at it! The following are his thoughts on the grasshopper method:

This is teaching what is necessary, it is realistic and under actual conditions—the most effective type of leadership teaching. However, it is fragmented, a little of this subject, a little of that subject, a little of this skill and a little of that skill.

Thus, the teaching will be throughout the entire educational expedition. Fragmentation of learning and actual experience will be furthered by "opportunity" teaching. That is taking advantage of situations that present an unusual opportunity to teach knowledge, judgment and skills pertaining to a present and actual situation. This situation itself may present a solution based upon many subjects and parts of several skills.

This type of leadership education we call the grasshopper method is a necessary and practical method of leadership education in the field. The method places a burden on the instructor to keep track of what is taught concerning each subject by the "grasshopper method" of jumping from one subject to another as opportunity and necessity dictates. The instructor must make sure before the educational program is finished to teach and give the experience concerning the subject not covered by the necessary day to day teaching and the opportunity teaching combined. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

What is important to understand about Petzoldt's teaching method was his attempt to formalize the process in order to present an entire curriculum. Outdoor leadership could be taught using this "hop scotch" approach of presenting information. It should be noted that the grasshopper method is actually an extension of his original thoughts on opportunity teaching. "It is very effective to use actual situations for demonstrating various facts of outdoorsmanship. Any opportunity that arises on the trail or at the campsite can trigger on-the-spot teaching" (Petzoldt, 1974, p. 268). Petzoldt was trying to explain that the grasshopper method was a more sophisticated adaptation of opportunity teaching or what is commonly known as the "teachable moment." The grasshopper method was Petzoldt's way of saying that instructors must systematically link teachable moments to present a complete curriculum. If the instructor could understand and apply this concept, the propensity to share too much information would not exist during the first 24 hours. More importantly, Petzoldt believed that if instructors could role model this methodology, the students would then begin to

develop the necessary skills and knowledge to demonstrate judgment.

Petzoldt qualified his experience with the grasshopper method when he stated this warning to instructors. "The explanation of the difference in teaching will need to be explained and illustrated over and over and again and again before the college upperclassman, the college graduate and even the college professor, so ingrained in our educational system, can understand or apply this method" (Petzoldt, n.d.). Petzoldt went on to explain the necessity to frame the grasshopper method for the unsuspecting student:

The instructor teaching outdoor leadership under actual conditions in the field must understand how such teaching is different in method and purpose from classroom teaching. Classroom teaching generally consists of giving information by voice, reading or artificial visual aids. Though the purpose of such teaching is supposed to be effectively translated into field conditions that is not what actually takes place. The main purpose to the student will be to memorize material so he can make a grade and pass a course by being able to speak or write the memorized material. Seldom and sometimes it never needs to be translated into decision making with real people under real circumstances.

The most effective teaching in the field though, it is fragmented to solve daily necessities and opportunity situations should not be translated into memory for the regurgitation of that memory but must be translated into decisions—decisions that are translated into action. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

Judgment/Decision-Making Skills

The final theme pulled from Petzoldt's work was the importance of developing judgment and decision-making skills. Petzoldt wrote tirelessly on these concepts the last 20 years of his life, and came into contact with a new generation of students with prior outdoor leadership experience. Petzoldt's experience showed him that a participant's prior experience sometime, hinders further development in decision-making skills. This was not a new topic for Petzoldt. He broached the subject in his first book, *Wilderness Handbook* (Petzoldt, 1974). "Dealing with the 'expert' who has had some experience and wants to publicize his knowledge presents a problem. He finds it more interesting to question than to listen" (Petzoldt, 1974, p. 265). He was constantly confronted with individuals who had preconceived notions of how things must be done in the outdoors. What was unique about his last 20 years was his consistent exposure to college students and university instructors on WEA trips. Petzoldt was working with students not only with technical skills but also with preexisting leadership skills:

Since most outdoor trips made by the students have been

'running' trips to reach a goal and return with little or no time allowed for education and decision-making it will be difficult for many students with previous experience to adjust to the educational trip. The instructors will need to mix the necessary learning with physical activity concerning necessary skills along with explaining why it is necessary to not follow the running, exhausting habits of most outdoor trips previously experienced by the students.

The difference between the educational trip and the running exhausting, goal-oriented trip must be understood. The relaxed, enjoyable, comfortable educational expedition will be difficult for the running, stress goal-oriented experience students have previously accepted as outdoor leadership education.

Many students will start the outdoor leadership education program with ideas, truths, prejudices, and habits that hinder programmatic learning based on demonstrable situation. The teacher, instructor cannot erase these traits by words. Argument will be counter productive. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

The underlying theme for the first day and throughout the entire course is judgment/decision-making. Confronting student attitudes and preconceived notions are just a few of the several factors an instructor must address. Instructors must also think out loud and explain the "whys" of their decisions once the student's mind is open. Petzoldt struggled to articulate how to use and teach judgment/decision-making. He believed the foundation for quality outdoor leadership was judgment and decision-making. Petzoldt professed that instructors could help students develop quality judgment and decision-making skills. To him, it was the decision-making and judgment ability that separated effective from non-effective instructors. Petzoldt's experience showed him that students schooled through traditional education tended to be dualistic thinkers. Petzoldt explained judgment this way:

First we need to understand between ourselves what is meant by the word judgment as it relates to the wild outdoors. Judgment is the process of using previous learning and experience to make a decision and execute decisions. Therefore all the information and experience presented in the program is for the purpose of making and executing decisions in similar circumstances in the future. However, these future situations will never be exactly the same as those circumstances where the teaching takes place. Therefore the decisions will be somewhat different to fit into different circumstances such as different people, different environment, different weather, different purpose, etc.

Teaching judgment under actual realistic conditions in actual environments with actual people gives a vast combination of decision-making experiences that the student can remember to apply to his future leadership. If the student memo-

rizes the decisions and methods used, he [sic] may be able to describe the process in words and speech to pass an exam. However, if the learning is to be effective in the future, the memorized response will not be adequate. Decisions will not be the same and the executions will not be the same as the memorized process.

How then do we teach the student this ability to have judgment in these future situations? One method is to be sure the student knows what we call the 'Whys' in relation to making and executing the decisions in the particular situation under which we are teaching.

Why are we teaching the subject?

Why are we teaching it now?

Why is our decision working?

Why does it apply to our purpose?

Why is it being done the way it is being done?

Why, Why, Why? (Petzoldt, n.d.)

Judgment decision-making, according to Petzoldt, was the combination of information available at the moment combined with past experience to yield a decision. All decisions should reduce the odds of injury or loss to people, conserve the environment and protect equipment needed for the expedition. Petzoldt attempted to emphasize the importance of judgment by making a comparison to the average person's attitude towards technical skills:

Skill level is not the most important part of outdoor leadership. Having judgment is the most important aspect. Another important aspect is knowing one's limitations and knowing one's ability. Having judgment to accept leadership within one's limitations [sic]. Since faulty planning is responsible for about 75% of deaths, accidents, search and rescue and plain unrewarding trips [sic]. Being taught the knowledge and judgment of how to plan a trip is indispensable to trip leadership. This is generally not considered a 'skill.' Skill in the outdoors is interpreted by most outdoorsmen [sic] to mean experience in physical activities such as biking, climbing, canoeing, etc.

Judgment and ability to plan and execute expedition behavior and judgment on how to use and still conserve the environment are far more important than the 'skills' unless you consider all the above 'skills', which is not the tendency of the average person. (Petzoldt, n.d.)

Petzoldt sometimes would say that judgment is the result of previous bad decisions. Therefore, it is important to give students information and reasons why decisions are made. The leader can accomplish this by thinking out loud. The process of thinking out loud at the beginning of a course is a crucial step in the development of a student's judgment. Petzoldt thought that

future judgments would be more sound if the “whys” of past decisions were clear.

Summary

Paul Petzoldt was one of the early pioneers in outdoor education that saw a future need for trained outdoor leaders (Ringholz, 1997). He spent the majority of his life searching for ways to move groups through the wilderness safely and enjoyably. Was he successful in his quest? Certainly we must admire any educator who stayed focused and true to his/her calling. What Petzoldt had was a true calling to develop methods necessary to meet his seemingly simple goal. The amount of material that he wrote in his lifetime and in big, scrawling longhand during the last twenty years of his life was testimony to his commitment. He refused to end the search of finding more effective ways to teach future outdoor leaders. A diminishing community of first generation outdoor leaders who learned directly from Paul Petzoldt can still be found in the field. However, scores of second and third generation outdoor leaders who may have heard of Petzoldt or maybe even heard him speak in his later years have now moved into industry leadership positions. They enjoyed his story telling ability but to experience his methods firsthand no longer exists.

Paul Petzoldt did not use theory. He made theory by learning from his rich experience. In the 1960s and 1970s he recognized that outdoor leaders had to take better care of the environment and testified during the Wilderness Act hearings for better education about the environment. He put low impact camping methods into his curriculum despite his past guiding practices of leaving cans in the backcountry. He was willing to change and tinker with ideas and equipment as technology emerged. He never stayed fixed on one idea as “the

truth.” The authors have chosen only three topics that seemed to have dominated Petzoldt’s thoughts in the last twenty years of his life. These thoughts included: (a) crucial components in the first 24 hours of an educational expedition, (b) the “Grasshopper Teaching” method and, (c) judgment and decision-making. Petzoldt would simply say, “rules are for fools.” It was instructor judgment that dictated all appropriate decisions. Petzoldt believed that the methodology used on an educational expedition must be different from other types of expeditions. Like a grasshopper, the instructor will hop from subject to subject as opportunities arise while systematically covering a curriculum. Instructors must also explain the “whys” of every decision so the student could comprehend on a deeper level. He understood the importance of setting a strong tone and tried to help leaders through a very intensive time at course start by giving them a system of priorities to guide their decisions.

While his central ideas have remained the same over the years, Petzoldt’s perspective was subject to refinement during the last twenty years of his life. We should harbor the valuable lessons that have been passed down in our rich tradition of outdoor leadership. It is a privilege to share pieces of Petzoldt’s work with outdoor professionals so his legacy will not be lost. Petzoldt actively paved our future until the very day he died. Petzoldt left us with a perspective that continues to merit discussion. What remained unchanged for Petzoldt, and for us, today, was the “burden of the load”—the outdoor leader’s commitment to the group must run deep.

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