About This Book

This book contains a collection of essays written by Richard Stopol, the President & CEO of NYC Outward Bound Schools, who is celebrating his 25th year in that role. These essays—many of which are adaptations of pieces Stopol wrote as part of Weekly Updates he sent to staff over the years—offer his reflections on different aspects of the distinctive approach to teaching and learning that NYC Outward Bound Schools brings to its work with New York City’s young people and their public schools. That approach is rooted in the philosophy of Kurt Hahn, the 20th-century European educator who founded Outward Bound, and whose writings are liberally referenced in these essays as touchstones for the author’s reflections. Taken together, the essays are meant to convey NYC Outward Bound Schools’ conception of what good education is all about and to elucidate the core values and beliefs that the organization has stood for since its inception.
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The fateful phone call that changes one’s life is not just the stuff of movies and novels. It happens in real life, too. My call came 25 years ago from NYC Outward Bound Schools’ Founding Board Chair, Bill Phillips, who relayed the news that the Board had just appointed me as the organization’s executive director. I knew immediately that it was a consequential call because I would be stepping into a demanding and exciting new role. But I had no idea that it would lead to 25 years of professional and personal gratification that goes well beyond anything I could have dreamed.

I remember wondering whether I was up to the task of leading this fledgling organization. And I’m fairly sure that my own trepidation was quietly matched by the Board’s. My doubts, however, were counterbalanced by a sense of possibility. As a program director at the Fund for the City of New York, where NYC Outward Bound Schools was being incubated, I was involved in getting the organization off the ground. So, by this point, I had been sufficiently exposed to its work to know that the idea of bringing Outward Bound to NYC’s young people and their public schools was one that was simply too good to fail. And equally important, I knew that there was a group of people associated with the organization whose commitment to and passion for it made failure unthinkable.

I wasn’t prescient enough then to see how far we would come. In truth, I doubt that any of us back then envisioned that there would one day be a national school model called Expeditionary Learning that is rooted in Outward Bound’s principles and practices, and is in place in more than 160 schools across the country. And I’m certain that none of us foresaw that in NYC we would today have a five-borough network of schools built on the Expeditionary Learning model that NYC Outward Bound Schools operates in partnership with the City’s Department of Education.

But even without the benefit of foresight, I could see 25 years ago that Outward Bound’s educational approach has an extraordinary power to change lives for the better and to change the way we envision what good education should look like. From NYC Outward Bound Schools’ inception, this uniquely powerful approach to teaching and learning has been our foundation, giving a constancy and weight to our work and grounding it in something immutable that both anchors and guides us.
We have from the beginning stood for an educational approach that blends individual best effort with concern and support for others, and treats learning not as an abstract exercise but as a concrete one grounded in genuine experience from which knowledge and skills are acquired and applied in real world contexts. Our approach is grounded in the belief that every individual is capable of great achievement with the right mix of challenge and support. And it places equal value on intellectual and character development, and sees them as inextricably linked.

For the past 25 years I have been a serial invoker of this definition of Outward Bound offered by Tom James, currently the Provost of Columbia Teachers College: “Outward Bound is a form of education aimed at bringing out the best in people.” With the simple word “best,” Tom captures the audacity of Outward Bound’s educational vision. We seek nothing less than to help every individual we serve discover and tap into their best selves as students, as workers, and as family and community members.

I have come to see that Bill Phillips’ fateful phone call was a great gift. It was the gift of my own personal Outward Bound experience, which is now 25 years in the making—and still going strong. It is an experience during which I have often been called upon to look for and find my best self. I have repeatedly been pushed beyond my comfort zone, venturing into unfamiliar territory and situations. I’ve received support from others at every turn, and with that support, accomplished things I didn’t think I was capable of and seen our organization reach heights that I would have believed impossible. And most satisfying of all, through this quarter-century journey I have had the privilege of helping to touch the lives of more than 60,000 young people from all corners of our City who we have pushed, prodded, encouraged, and otherwise equipped to be their best.

For as much success as we have achieved, I have no doubt that NYC Outward Bound Schools’ best years are ahead of us. I feel it in every fiber of my being that we are poised to take our work to new levels of quality, scale, and impact. And I am more energized than ever to continue the richly rewarding Outward Bound experience that I began 25 years ago—and forever grateful for that phone call.

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A GROWTH MINDSET

The phrase “growth mindset” is very much in vogue in education circles these days. It refers to the belief that students’ intelligence, talents, and abilities are malleable rather than fixed—capable of being developed and improved over time through intentional teaching strategies and persistent personal effort. While we at NYC Outward Bound Schools can’t take credit for that phrase—it was coined by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck—it is foundational to our belief system and underpins our approach to teaching and learning.

We believe that all of our students, regardless of background or circumstance, are capable of doing great things. And we believe that a fundamental aspect of our job as educators is to help our students discover and tap into their greatness, and in so doing, develop a belief in their own capability that will impel them into a lifetime of achievement.

Helping young people to believe in their own capabilities is widely acknowledged to be one of Outward Bound’s great strengths. In more common parlance, we help students develop self-esteem. In fact, people of all ages and all walks of life routinely emerge from exposure to Outward Bound with newfound self-confidence. That’s true whether this exposure takes place in a public school classroom or on a wilderness backpacking experience.

What’s the secret to Outward Bound’s success in building self-confidence? A great deal of that success is rooted in its use of what has been called “the pedagogy of experience” as a teaching and learning tool. In Outward Bound students engage in experiences through which they discover and demonstrate strengths and capabilities they may not have been aware they possess.
take from it is most often illusory and ephemeral. Real achievements are the building blocks of self-esteem.

In many respects, Outward Bound’s recipe for developing self-esteem goes against the grain of a culture where everyone gets a trophy for just participating, praise is handed out indiscriminately, and the pathway to building self-confidence is blessedly obstacle-free. But if our young people are going to develop the kind of self-esteem they will need to draw upon to take on the new challenges and the obstacles they will inevitably face in life, they need opportunities to demonstrate through their own efforts that they are capable of achieving success.

That’s especially true for many of the students whom we serve, who have not had much opportunity to experience success in their lives. For these students, achieving success and developing a belief in their own capability is the result of a carefully engineered learning process in which their accomplishments build upon one another. John Mighton, the founder of an education program called Jump Math, uses a similar learning process in his work and describes it well. He designs the program so that students experience some initial successes, which help to reduce their math anxiety. Mighton observes that “as they grow more confident, they grow excited and begin requesting harder challenges. More than anything, kids love success and they love getting to higher levels, like in a video game.”

Those of us who have seen Outward Bound’s approach to teaching and learning in action, whether in the classroom or the field, know this phenomenon well. We scaffold experiences for our students in which they have a taste of success and accomplishment. And we engage them in a cycle of success and confidence-building in which each success breeds greater confidence and greater willingness to take on bigger and more challenging tasks and activities.

It is through this intentionally sequenced learning process that our students develop a growth mindset and discover that they can do more than they thought possible. And it is through this process that they first experience education as something which can be transformational because they learn how true Outward Bound founder Kurt Hahn’s words really are: “There is more in us than we know. If we could be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for less.”
“Grit” is another term that has recently gained great currency among educators. The term was popularized by Dr. Angela Duckworth, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and refers to people’s ability to persevere through adversity and be resilient in the face of failure. A spate of recent research points to grit as a particularly powerful predictor of success in college and other life endeavors, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This research reinforces something that we at NYC Outward Bound Schools have long known to be true: grit is a skill that can be taught. In fact, one of the great strengths of the Outward Bound teaching and learning approach is that it provides students with opportunities to both experience success and learn from failure. Our school model, Expeditionary Learning, is grounded in ten design principles, one of which beautifully captures the interplay between success and failure: “All students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges. But it is also important for students to learn from their failures to persevere when things are hard, and to learn to turn disabilities into opportunities.” There are few educational organizations that I know of that so intentionally and explicitly incorporate these ideas into their pedagogy. And there are fewer still that so deliberately and unapologetically embrace failure as a teaching tool.

Failure is baked into our educational approach not because we are mean-spirited or sadistic, but rather because we recognize the indispensable role that failure plays in developing grit and learning life lessons. Indeed, I’d go as far as to say that failure is the magic elixir in learning. But I’d also say that like all elixirs it must be handled carefully and wisely. Its dosage must be regulated with precision and the conditions under which it is prescribed must always be monitored and appropriately contextualized.

When successful people are asked about the most important learning and lessons in their own lives they will invariably point to some failure they experienced and learned from. This tells us that as educators we must provide for our students the kind of learning environment in which they feel safe in trying new things and tackling
difficult work, even if that comes with a risk of failure. We must help them develop the skills to push through adversity when they encounter it. And we must provide our students with the structures and support to reflect on their failures so that they can both understand what contributed to them and how to turn them into successes going forward.

When students come to our headquarters in Long Island City, Queens to climb our five-story rock wall, we don’t expect them to get to the top in their first attempt. We expect them to struggle and to learn from that struggle, improving in their technique and their resolve with each subsequent attempt. Similarly, in our classrooms when we assign students a research paper, we don’t expect that they will get it right with their first draft. We expect them to struggle through the process of submitting multiple drafts, with each draft building on the earlier one to eliminate mistakes and strengthen arguments, until success is finally achieved.

Our educators at NYC Outward Bound Schools play a pivotal role in achieving this balance. They must be comfortable with the idea that their students will be allowed to fail, at least initially. They must know how to inoculate their students against the sting of failure and provide them with the encouragement and support they need to risk trying again. And they must be skilled in giving them the kinds of feedback and instruction that can help them translate their failures into successes.

This act of educational jujitsu—helping our students learn how to turn their failures into successes—is a key component of our teaching and learning approach. It is how we at NYC Outward Bound Schools cultivate grit and teach our students some of the most important life lessons they will ever learn: that success and failure are conjoined and that the latter oftentimes breeds the former.

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MORAL COURAGE

One thing that has always drawn me to Outward Bound is that it deliberately and actively teaches courage to its students. This includes physical courage, such as getting students to put aside their fear of heights on a rappel or ropes course. It includes emotional courage, like helping students step out of their comfort zones and attempt things they were reluctant to try previously. And it includes intellectual courage, such as asking students to do demanding academic work that takes them to the limits of their ability and causes them to think deeply about complex issues they have not encountered before and may even find discomfiting.

Most profoundly, however, Outward Bound encourages and teaches moral courage: the willingness to stand up for what one believes to be right and just. In the words of Outward Bound’s founder, Kurt Hahn: “Education must enable young people to effect what they have recognized to be right, despite hardships, despite dangers, despite inner skepticism, despite boredom, and despite mockery from the world…” As is the case with so much of Hahn’s language, his words, despite their Old World European locutions, have great resonance to us today. They are a reminder that there is a moral dimension to education: that there is right and wrong in the world and that our responsibilities as educators include helping our students set their moral compasses so that they recognize and pursue that which is right and seek to address that which is wrong.

Moral courage comes in many forms. In its most extreme form, it’s the courage to risk injury and even death by standing up for a set of ideals. That’s the kind of courage that Hahn himself exhibited when he exhorted the alumni of the first school he founded, the Salem School in Germany, to stand up to Hitler and the Nazis. Reflecting Hahn’s legacy, we in Outward Bound expect our students to stand up for what they believe, to be defenders of and fighters for justice, and to be bulwarks against injustice.

But moral courage doesn’t have to involve putting one’s life on the line. It can also be found in smaller acts of conviction like standing up to bullying in school or speaking out on an issue of concern even when the position one is taking defies the popular will. For adolescents in particular the willingness to break ranks with one’s peer group is indeed an act of courage.
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There are some for whom these forms of courage come naturally. But for most of us, they must be taught and nurtured; they must be developed like a muscle. Schools, along with parents and the community at large, have an important role to play in developing this muscle and fostering moral courage. Yet while moral courage counts among the most important things we should be trying to teach our students, it isn’t talked about much, if at all, in most schools. And it certainly doesn’t show up on the report cards that are given out to assess how students and schools are doing. Here again, Kurt Hahn has something to teach us: on the report cards at the schools he founded, students were assessed on their “sense of justice,” and on their “ability to follow out what {they} believe to be the right course in the face of discomforts, hardships, dangers, mockery, boredom, skepticism, and impulses of the moment.”

We should be assessing our students on their ability to read and write well, to problem-solve, think critically, and a host of other skills that they need to be successful in college, the workplace, and citizenship. But we would also do well to follow Hahn’s example and include assessments of their ability to stand up for what they believe to be right. That particular measure of achievement goes to the heart of what it means to be a fully realized human being.
CREW, NOT PASSENGERS

When our students are asked to name the defining feature of our schools, the word they most often invoke is “family.” They talk about receiving extensive support from peers and adults. They refer to a strong sense of community that begins when they first enter the school and continues through to graduation. And in describing their schools, they often use the phrase “We are crew, not passengers,” which originated with Outward Bound’s founder, Kurt Hahn, and which has become the unofficial motto of many of our schools.

This “crew, not passengers” ethos manifests itself in a number of ways. It has a literal application since students in our schools are organized into “Crews.” A Crew is a group of 12-15 students supported by a teacher, who serves as the students’ advisor, mentor and advocate. Crews meet 3-5 times each week and typically stay together through graduation. Crew serves a number of vital functions. Through it, students receive academic advisement as well as college selection and application assistance. It is the portal through which our schools conduct much of their parent/family outreach, as Crew Advisors keep parents abreast of their child’s progress and serve as the family’s central point of contact. Most critically, Crew operates as a kind of family group, providing students with adult and peer-to-peer support. It provides a safe, nurturing space where students can drop their guard and feel free to be themselves.

Crew is a big reason why students in our schools feel so well-known and cared for by adults. Crew Advisors are responsible for deeply knowing their own Crews, for championing them, and for navigating them through issues they encounter. The result is an intimacy between adults and students that is rarely found in schools. I came across a study several years ago which showed that on average, American high schools students have a conversation with an adult just once every 48 hours. My own high school experience reflected this: there was no adult in my large public high school who knew me other than in the most surface of ways and whom I felt comfortable approaching with a personal issue.

It is no accident that at our schools’ graduations, Crew Advisors are the ones who present students with their diplomas. Because they have been with the students in their Crews for multiple years, they have firsthand knowledge of their Crew
members’ every triumph and travail—and they have become deeply invested in their success. I am repeatedly struck by this personal connection when I hear the words offered by advisors to their students when they come onstage to receive their diplomas. In many cases, “love” would not be too strong a word to describe the feeling between them.

The “crew, not passengers” ethos reflects many of our deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning. We believe learning is enhanced when done in the context of a community of learners, and we endeavor to construct learning experiences for our students in which they are engaged together in the pursuit of knowledge and the development of skills. We believe we learn more with others, who can challenge our assumptions and perspectives, confirm ideas and conclusions, and support us in trying new approaches. And we believe a core responsibility of educators is to create and sustain the conditions that allow for these kinds of communities of learners to form and thrive.

In our schools, the “crew, not passengers” ethos is hardly confined to Crew. It is deeply embedded into their cultures and shapes all student-to-student and adult-to-student interactions. It is grounded in the premise that all members of the school community are in a relationship of interdependence, in which there is both a need and value in finding common cause with one other. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the essence of this interdependency in this excerpt from his Letter from a Birmingham Jail: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly…” King recognized, as we do in Outward Bound, that our lives and our actions are all bound up in one another’s, and that as a result we all have an obligation to take care of and look after one another.

Dr. King’s words are particularly resonant for those of us who have ever been on an Outward Bound mountaineering course, where we are constantly reminded that success is defined in terms of getting everyone to the top of the mountain, not just ourselves. So too in our schools, where there is a shared commitment to getting to the top of the academic mountaintop and a fierce determination to truly leave no child behind.
CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

Over the years I have heard people on countless occasions refer to the “magic” of Outward Bound, the indefinable quality that makes it such a powerful form of teaching and learning. And as I’ve listened to them talk in more detail about that magical quality, I have come to realize that what they are referring to most of all is the distinctive mix of challenge and support that Outward Bound brews up to help people give their best effort, do their best work, and be their best selves.

I often think of challenge and support as the twin poles of the Outward Bound teaching and learning approach. One pole is represented by Outward Bound founder Kurt Hahn’s statement to his students that “there is more in you than you think,” and the other by another statement he expressed frequently to them, “we are crew, not passengers.” What we at NYC Outward Bound Schools do when we are at our best is find that precise midpoint between those two poles in ways that allow our students to both discover their own capabilities and draw upon the support of others so that they can achieve at levels beyond what they thought was possible.

Outward Bound educators—whether they are the teachers in our schools or the instructors who lead our field experiences—are superb at finding that sweet spot between challenge and support. They have finely tuned instincts, honed by training and experience, as to when to push and prod their students and when to lend them a helping hand.

Knowing when and where to place their thumbs on the scale to provide just the right amount of challenge for their students is an especially delicate task that requires a particular set of skills. It requires being able to motivate students to take risks and step out of their comfort zones in ways that are constructive and lead to learning. We use a graphic in our work with educators which consists of a series of concentric circles. One of those circles represents students’ comfort zones, and is a circle that we strive to move our students out of. The second circle represents students’ learning zones, and it is the one that we strive to move our students into. There is, however, a third circle representing the danger zone—the place where students shut down to learning because of anxiety or fear—which we seek to avoid. Getting our students into the learning zone and keeping them there is part art and part science. And it is an admixture of art and science that is the product of much training and practice.
The magic can only happen when our educators learn through training and practice that stepping out of one’s comfort zone is a highly variable, individualized experience. What may feel like a huge risk to one student may not feel like one at all to others. And conversely, what may seem like the smallest of risks to some can loom large as a mountain to others. For some rappelling down a rock face may not feel risky at all, but presenting a piece of work in front of parents, peers, and teachers might be paralyzing. This means that our educators need to be acutely aware of and sensitive to the things that make our students feel unsafe and vulnerable. They must know our students well enough and be sufficiently attuned to both their strengths and vulnerabilities to be able to push them when they need pushing and comfort them when they need comforting.

Outward Bound’s magic happens in both outdoor and classroom settings. In fact, encouraging and teaching risk-taking in the classroom can be just as important as outside of the classroom, if not more so. For some of our students just reading aloud in the classroom carries with it huge risks. It is our responsibility to create learning environments where they are comfortable taking those risks; where they are willing to practice their reading skills and sometimes even struggle with the pronunciation of words because they know they won’t be laughed at or otherwise embarrassed by their peers. Beyond that, we need to create environments in our classrooms where students are encouraged and taught to engage in intellectual risk-taking. This includes their being willing to push against the boundaries of their own thinking, ask questions, test assumptions, and open themselves up to new perspectives and ideas. It includes stretching themselves to tackle content they find challenging and to produce work that requires them to call upon and apply new knowledge and skills.

It is when we do all this that the magic truly happens: the magic of helping students discover and realize their full potential—in the classroom, in careers, as citizens, and in family and community life.
STEUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

For 25 years I've begun my work days by looking at a sign in my work space that says: “What does this conversation have to do with our students?” That sign keeps me ever vigilant to the need to put our students front and center in my thinking and decision-making. But it is also a proud reminder that I am part of an organization whose approach to teaching and learning is profoundly student-centered.

Indeed, a major hallmark of our educational approach to teaching and learning is that we invest students with significant responsibility for their own learning. This doesn’t mean our students are left to their own devices, free to pursue any interest in any fashion. Rather, in both our classes and our courses, learning is highly structured and follows a sequence we call “training, main, and final.” Through it, we gradually but firmly shift responsibility for learning from teacher to student.

During “training,” students receive lots of direct instruction as they develop the skills we expect them to master. During “main,” they practice their skills while their teacher provides guidance and feedback. During “final,” they demonstrate their mastery with minimal to no assistance from their teachers. For example, during the final phase of an Outward Bound river rafting course, students, not instructors, are expected to captain the raft through any rapids they encounter. Similarly, during the final phase of a learning expedition at our schools, students studying the issue of hydrofracking are expected to navigate a rapids of sorts themselves—by presenting their findings and recommendations to public officials considering the issue and attempting to influence their policy positions.

This willingness to put students at the fore reflects our deep-seated belief in the capabilities of young people and our recognition of the need to put those capabilities to a genuine test. We take to heart these words of Outward Bound founder, Kurt Hahn: “Give the children tasks which if negligently performed will wreck the ship of state.”

I recently attended an education conference where one of the speakers asserted that the more rigorous a course is, the more time students work apart from their teacher. This initially struck me as counterintuitive since I, like most people I suspect, generally think of rigor as a product of the material a teacher provides; the more material s/he provides and the more challenging that material is, the more rigorous
the course. But as I thought about his comment, I realized how much it squares with our students’ experiences and my own as a learner.

Almost all of my own rigorous learning experiences have been ones in which I was brought to the point where I assumed agency over my learning. During each experience, I developed an intrinsic motivation to learn and therefore began working independently to acquire knowledge and develop skills. As a college student, my academic advisor gave me guidance and feedback for my senior thesis, but the research and writing was something I spent hundreds of hours doing on my own. The result was a product that I am still proud of today. Similarly, as a basketball player, coaches gave me crucial instruction and motivation, but the countless hours I spent alone practicing my skills dwarfed the time I spent with them, and was, in my estimation, by far the most significant factor in developing my basketball abilities.

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This kind of student-centered learning thrives in our schools, and not by chance. We offer many structures that place students center-stage, in front of authentic audiences, where they must present and defend their work. For example, during Student-Led Conferences students present and reflect upon the previous semester’s work to an audience consisting of the teacher who serves as their Crew Advisor, a parent or family member, and often a panelist from outside the school (such as a NYC Outward Bound Schools staff or Board member). Typically, students present several pieces of work in detail, offer an overview of their learning across academic subjects, share their report card grades, and lead a discussion about improving future performance. Audience members can question the student, and are asked to assess the presentation using a detailed rubric. Crew Advisors often conclude with an articulated plan of action, agreed to by student and parent, which is aimed at addressing problem areas.

Expeditionary Learning recently published a wonderful new book co-authored by Ron Berger, Leah Rugen and Libby Woodfin, which chronicles the many structures and practices, including Student-Led Conferences, used in Expeditionary Learning schools to make learning and assessment student-centered. The book’s title perfectly captures the role that the students in our schools and all Expeditionary Learning schools are expected to play. They are truly Leaders Of Their Own Learning.
BOLDNESS OF SPIRIT

We subscribe to what is called in education literature an asset-based approach to education and youth development. We don’t see the young people we serve as needing repair; rather we see them as full of potential and strengths that are waiting to be tapped. I have always been drawn to Outward Bound because it is so unrelentingly asset-based. For us, young people are assets to be developed and nurtured rather than problems to be solved. We start by assuming that every young person with whom we come into contact is capable of doing exceptional things.

This faith in young people—this bedrock belief in their capability—is part of our Outward Bound heritage and of our organizational DNA. The story is told of Outward Bound’s founder Kurt Hahn, who as the founder and headmaster of a school was confronted with a teacher who said, “I have no faith in this boy.” Hahn’s response was, “Then you have no right to educate him.”

Amid all the clutter on my desk at work can be found two lapel buttons that I saw being distributed to students several years ago when I visited one of our schools. The first one says “At Risk” and features a big red line that runs across those words. The second button says “At Promise.” These buttons, which are meant to be worn side-by-side, provide a visual reminder that we do our students a disservice if we think about them as being at risk. Yes, they face many risk factors in their lives and some may be experiencing life circumstances that are precarious, but they are not fragile vessels who are ready to break. Each comes to us with unbounded potential, and talents still undiscovered. As educators whose work is grounded in Outward Bound’s philosophy and approaches, our job is to help them discover the promise that is within them.

Through our work we hope to help our students recognize, through direct experience, that they can accomplish their goals, even big, audacious ones, if they persevere and give their best effort. We also teach our students to be resilient in the face of adversity and learn how to overcome obstacles and failures. And in so doing, we are helping our students to develop an optimistic worldview in which they see the glass as half full, never half empty.

We look for our students to have a light in their eyes that bespeaks a zest for life, along with a sense of curiosity and wonder about the world around them. We look, too, for them to step out eagerly into that world, ready to draw deeply from all that it has to offer them.
We are not, it should be emphasized, developing a cadre of cockeyed optimists who expect the sun to shine all day and every lottery ticket to yield a jackpot. We are helping our students develop real skills and habits of mind, along with a can-do attitude, which research tells us not only translates into richer, fuller lives but contributes to more tangible improvements in life outcomes, such as longer life expectancies.

We are, in short, striving to imbue our students with “boldness of spirit,” a phrase which goes to the very essence of Outward Bound. In fact, the original NYC Outward Bound Schools mission statement explicitly referenced boldness of spirit as one of the traits that we seek to instill in our students, and I used to proudly assert that we surely were the only organization that actually incorporated that phrase into its mission statement. I recall feeling some regret when it was removed from our mission statement some years ago. But while it may no longer be an explicit part of our mission statement, it is very much a part of what we are about and what we seek to promote in our students.

Years ago, I attended a meeting with Greg Farrell, the founding President of Expeditionary Learning, and heard him define the distinguishing characteristics of an Outward Bound student as having “brightness of eye and liveliness of step.” And I remember thinking it was a good shorthand description of boldness of spirit and of what we hope our students will exhibit. We look for our students to have a light in their eyes that bespeaks a zest for life, along with a sense of curiosity and wonder about the world around them. We look, too, for them to step out eagerly into that world, ready to draw deeply from all that it has to offer them.
REAL-WORLD LEARNING

A question that I seldom if ever hear when I visit classrooms and talk to the students in our schools is the time-honored plaint of students everywhere: “why am I learning this?” That’s true whether the class is in English, social studies, science, or even math, where the study of algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus have historically prompted this question from students who are unable to see how what they are learning can be usefully applied in any realm of their lives.

There are three main reasons why that question is rarely voiced in our schools. First, we connect learning to the real world: to topics and issues of interest and concern to our students. In our schools, students delve into big societal issues like immigration reform, race relations, and climate change that significantly affect their lives and the lives of others. They also immerse themselves in local issues directly affecting them and their communities, such as alternative uses for an abandoned lot near their school or strategies for reducing gun violence in their neighborhood.

Whether they are studying a global issue or a local one, our students meet with experts to get their perspectives on the issue, conduct extensive documentary research on that issue, collect and analyze data, and debate alternative positions. They work together on some final product or set of products that brings together all they have learned on the issue—such as a research paper that analyzes the pros and cons of various alternative energy sources, or a plan to the local Community Board for repurposing the abandoned lot. And they share that product with an audience for feedback.

A second and related reason why relevancy is rarely a problem in our schools is that wherever possible we employ an interdisciplinary approach. To get their arms around the issues they are studying, students need to draw upon a variety of different academic disciplines and they need to be able to synthesize their learning from each discipline. Rather than learn statistics and probability in a vacuum, students learn math skills by applying them to a broader unit of study such as the drawbacks
and benefits of gentrification—analyzing historical and current census data from a local neighborhood that has recently been gentrified. A unit such as this would require students to read and write extensively about the topic—skills which in our schools are not restricted to English class, but instead are a staple of all their academic classes. And similarly, developing students’ research and presentational skills is also a focus of all classes. In this way, students see the connections between what they learn from one class to the next, and experience learning as an integrated, holistic endeavor, not one that is divided into 45 minute periods of time that are unrelated to one another.

The third reason why our students are able to see the relevancy of what they are learning is that we practice what has been called “consequential learning.” Our students quickly realize that there are consequences attached to learning or failing to learn what is being taught. On an Outward Bound course, for example, when an instructor teaches the skills involved in setting up a rain tarp, the student who fails to pay attention and absorb the lesson suffers the immediate and very real consequence of getting wet when it rains. While perhaps not quite as dramatically, this kind of learning is also ever present in our schools. Whenever students are taught a skill, they are asked to apply it immediately and demonstrate their level of proficiency. They can then clearly see, as can the teacher, whether the skill has been mastered or whether there is still work to be done in developing it further.

So, what is our formula for engaging our students in their learning and getting them to see the connections between what they are learning and their lives? It is to involve them in issues that matter to them and their communities. It is to help them understand the interconnectedness of the subjects they are studying. And it is to give them opportunities to apply and demonstrate their learning in real situations where success or failure is in the balance.
THE JOY OF LEARNING

When I visit our schools and see our students and teachers in action, one of the phrases that often leaps to mind for me is “the joy of learning.” I see teachers who work hard to inject elements of discovery and adventure into the learning process. I see students who are deeply engaged in their learning as they make new discoveries and experience inquiry as adventure. And most gratifying of all, I see students who are excited about what they are learning and who have developed a genuine love of learning.

We endorse the idea that play, in both its structured and unstructured forms, is an essential component of learning. As parents and early childhood educators know from experience, it is through play that children have the opportunity to become familiar with and make meaning of phenomena in the world around them, fuel their imaginations, and develop social skills. Through both out-of-school and in-school experiences, children and adolescents need the time and space that play affords to try new things, test limits, and develop the sense of curiosity that is a prerequisite to all future learning. Play also helps students develop the vital skill of learning how to learn by exposing them to the inherent messiness of the learning process.

I confess that “joy” and “play” are terms that I’ve had some ambivalence about connecting to our work because, for some people, they connote frivolousness. There is an unfortunate tendency to conflate academic rigor with seriousness, even drudgery. The mental picture many people have of students doing challenging, difficult academic work is of serious expressions and furrowed brows, not smiling faces.

But academic rigor and smiling faces are not mutually exclusive. In fact, at NYC Outward Bound Schools we believe that injecting joy into learning can actually contribute to higher levels of academic rigor. Joy results in increased student motivation and investment in learning, which in turn makes it more likely that students will acquire new knowledge and skills.

We also recognize that much of what has traditionally flown under the banner of rigorous learning, such as drilling students on their recall of facts, may not be...
especially rigorous. The kind of learning we emphasize in our schools, which involves wrestling with complex, multi-layered, real-world issues that call for critical thinking and problem-solving skills demands a degree of rigor that far surpasses tasks that simply require rote memorization. There is a joy that comes from this kind of rigorous learning: the joy of stretching one’s mind and working together to address issues that matter.

“Learning noise” is a companion phrase to “the joy of learning,” which we listen for in our schools as a sign of student engagement. Too often, we think of good classrooms as places where students sit quietly waiting to be called upon, and we associate noise with disruption and bad student behavior. But noise can be both positive and desirable, indicating that students are involved in and excited by their own learning.

When I enter our classrooms, more often than not I hear the noise of students collaborating, asking questions of their teachers and one another, sharing their perspectives and insights, grappling with and advancing new ideas, and struggling with and developing their understanding of unfamiliar concepts. In short, I hear students who are experiencing the exuberance of discovery. That kind of noise is always a pleasure to hear.
OUR VISION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

What does it mean to be a high achieving student? For those of us in education, this is a foundational question. Our answers shape every aspect of how we approach schooling—including how we design curriculum, approach instruction, and assess student and teacher performance. Unfortunately, in large part because of the dictates of No Child Left Behind, our public schools have lately answered this question with an increasingly narrow definition of student achievement: one based almost entirely on standardized test scores.

At NYC Outward Bound Schools we embrace a more multi-dimensional vision, which not only includes the ability to do well on tests, but also to achieve success in the realms of character and citizenship. We want and expect our students to think deeply and critically; read with passion and understanding; write and speak well; be persevering, resilient, bold of spirit, and compassionate toward others; and last but hardly least, be active citizens who are leaders in their own communities and stand up for what they believe to be right.

This vision does not ignore test scores nor other traditional measures of student and school success such as attendance, graduation, and college admission rates. In determining our students’ levels of achievement, these are all things that we assess and consider seriously. But while they give us important information about how our students are doing, they only tell a part of the story.

We aim for a fuller, richer picture of student achievement that also considers how deeply students demonstrate the character skills that we teach and encourage, like self-discipline, grit, initiative, empathy, and compassion. While these are harder to quantify than standardized test scores, they are no less important especially because we know that there is a direct relationship between character skills and academic performance. We look too for whether our students demonstrate care and concern for issues that matter to their communities and whether they are engaged in service to others. These are indicators of a different sort, which go to our students’ achievements as citizens.

Our vision of student achievement also extends to the quality of work that students produce. Indeed, it is through their work that we can best assess our students’
achievement levels. This is certainly the case in the workplace where people’s knowledge, skills, and talents are judged primarily on the quality of their work. And it should be the case in our schools as well that student work is routinely held up for examination as a prime indicator of achievement. We should expect of our students and hold them accountable for consistently producing work that demonstrates their content knowledge and understanding, shows proficiency in the skills they have been taught, and meets high standards of craftsmanship.

Craftsmanship is a word that appears frequently in the writings of Outward Bound’s founder, Kurt Hahn, who decried the “decline of skill and use due to the weakened tradition of craftsmanship” that he observed in the youth of his time. But craftsmanship is something of an old-fashioned word which is not much in use these days, at least not in education circles. When it is used it tends to have a rather narrow connotation, having to do with technical skill or expertise. Our conception of craftsmanship is a more expansive one. In our context, it means attention to detail and to aesthetics, and most of all, it means a sense of pride in having done something well. Ron Berger, Expeditionary Learning’s Chief Academic Officer, beautifully captures this notion of craftsmanship in the introduction to his book *An Ethic of Excellence*. Ron writes, “I want a classroom full of craftsmen. I want students whose work is strong and accurate and beautiful. Students who are proud of what they do...”

That’s what we at NYC Outward Bound Schools want from all of our students, too: students who stand out for the quality of the work they do, the quality of the person they are, the quality of the contributions they make to their families, communities and the world in which they live, and who are capable of acing any test they take as well. That is the vision of student achievement that animates and shapes our work.

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TEACHING CHARACTER

Paul Tough’s book How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character strikes a special chord for those of us who have long preached the gospel that character must be taught in our public schools. Drawing upon research in child development and neuroscience, Tough makes a powerful case that non-cognitive character skills like grit, resilience, and curiosity contribute mightily to students’ success in college and beyond.

But while he does much to advance the case for cultivating character in schools, Tough’s analysis falls short in two important respects. First, he fails to acknowledge the critical relationship between the development of individual character and community. Community is the crucible in which character is formed. The best way to develop students’ grit, self-confidence, and other character skills is in the context of a community of peers who motivate and look after one another. Students are more likely to challenge themselves, risk failure, and persevere toward success when they are supported and inspired by the sense of shared purpose, sacrifice, and pursuit that a community provides.

The more serious shortcoming in Tough’s analysis has to do with the distinction he makes between “performance” and “moral” character. He concludes that the latter—which includes traits like integrity, honesty and compassion—should not necessarily be taught in schools, citing a paucity of research showing that teaching moral character contributes to students’ success in school. While I don’t dispute the research, I do reject the conclusion, which confuses means and ends.

For Tough, teaching character is a means to an end: “performance character” helps students succeed academically and persist through college. While this is a laudable reason to teach character, it is hardly the only one. We should also teach moral character traits like kindness, courage, and empathy because they are ends unto themselves. We should want and expect our students to be compassionate and trustworthy and ready to stand up for the things they believe in whether that translates into improved academic performance or not.
I suspect any quarrels I have with Tough derive from our differing conceptions of the purpose of education. I see education’s purpose as bigger, broader, and, dare I say, nobler than just college and career preparedness. Education should activate each individual’s best self. It should provide all students with the skills, knowledge, and tools to help them achieve their full potential as human beings and maximize their contributions to their families, their communities, and to our world.

Education, particularly public education, should not take place in a moral vacuum. Our public schools, more than any institution in America, should be a reflection of who we are as a people and embody our aspirations for our children. Public education must be grounded in the common values that comprise our moral fabric and bind us together as a nation, such as care and concern for others.

When we provide our young people with an education that is unmoored from morality, we do so at our peril. No one understood this better than Outward Bound’s founder Kurt Hahn, a renowned European educator who founded the Salem school in 1920s Germany. As the Nazis came to power, he saw how they used education to indoctrinate the young through an ideology that valued individual and collective strength but failed to counterbalance it with humaneness.

Hahn later spawned and inspired many other educational initiatives, including Outward Bound and Expeditionary Learning, which brings a model built upon demanding academics, community, and character to schools throughout the U.S. Describing his educational philosophy Hahn wrote: “It is the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible denial, and above all, compassion.”

Those words are just as relevant in 21st-century America as they were in Hahn’s Germany. Let’s take them to heart.
Service occupies a central place in Outward Bound. Accordingly, over the years I have spent a fair amount of time seeing service in action in our schools and on our courses, and thinking about the role it should play in education.

It is perhaps a bit surprising, then, that it took a recent experience I had on the subway to get me to think anew about the nature of service. It wasn’t an especially dramatic experience; in fact, it was one of those quotidian experiences that is part and parcel of living in New York City. Quite simply, I was standing in a subway car when an elderly man supported by two canes walked very slowly and painfully onto the crowded car. We traveled for several stops until I got off, and throughout that ride, no one got up and offered their seat to him. It wasn’t clear to me whether some people actually made a willful decision to not give their seats up or whether they simply failed to notice him and his need. Either way, it struck me as an abdication of our collective obligation to be of service to and in community with one another. This man needed those of us who were on that subway car with him to acknowledge him, empathize with him, and take care of him. And we failed him on all counts.

I think part of the reason this experience so affected me is because it felt like a violation of what we at Outward Bound believe in and stand for. My reading of founder Kurt Hahn suggests he believed that the whole point of Outward Bound is to activate people to service: that the newfound strength one discovers through an Outward Bound experience should be used to help others. The motto of Gordonstoun, the school Hahn founded in Scotland, was Non Sibi, translated as “not for oneself,” and at all of Hahn’s schools and programs, a core teaching is that we all have a responsibility to look out for and take care of one another.

At Gordonstoun, Hahn organized students into rescue patrols and watches, and trained them to rescue ships and crews that ran afoul of the rocky cliffs and shoals of the Firth of Moray, the body of water that lies next to the school. He believed that giving young people the opportunity to engage in dramatic, audacious service such as saving the life of another human being was transformative—that it helped them not only to discover their own capability but to develop in them the quality that Hahn
prized above all and that he considered the sine qua non of education: compassion. But he also believed that simple acts of service, the kinds we can engage in every day with one another, are a powerful way of developing compassion.

It strikes me that it is these smaller acts that matter most and truly define a life of service. Very few of us have the opportunity to save another person’s life, but we all have multiple opportunities, every day, to respond to someone else’s need, to engage in acts of kindness, or to simply make human connections. It could be a colleague, friend, or family member to whom we extend a helping hand, an extra moment of time, or a word of encouragement. Or it could be the stranger on the subway to whom attention should be paid.
ON THE DEATH OF ONE OF OUR STUDENTS
MAY 16, 2010

It has been more than a week now, and I still can’t shake the sadness and anger that I am feeling in the wake of the death of a student who was shot and killed last weekend while attending a party in the Bronx. I suspect that it will be many, many weeks, if ever, before the ache in my heart subsides and my anger dissipates.

We do the work we do because we want to give young people the best possible opportunity to live full, productive and meaningful lives. So when a young person like this student—I will call her Samantha—has her life cut short due to senseless violence, it feels especially painful, cruel and unjust. No one, especially a child, should ever have to worry about being shot or otherwise harmed in their own homes or when they walk the streets of their neighborhoods. But the sad reality is that there are far too many neighborhoods in this city, and across the country, where the kind of violence that took her life is, if not commonplace, all too common. An equally sad reality is that it continues to get too little attention because the people it most affects are those who are often voiceless and powerless—mostly poor people of color.

For those of us who are in education, there is a temptation when we learn of the death of a young person like Samantha to throw up our hands in despair and decide that what we do as educators doesn’t matter; to conclude that nothing we do in schools can trump what happens in the streets. But we must not succumb to that temptation because education not only matters, it matters profoundly. While education didn’t save Samantha, for many others it will be the difference between life and death.
Parents and families have a major role to play in changing the destructive norms of behavior that contribute to violent acts like Samantha’s shooting, but so too do schools. The network of schools that NYC Outward Bound Schools operates, with their emphasis on community and character, can play a powerful role in promoting and reinforcing positive norms.

On a macro level, today more than ever, education is the predicate for moving up the economic ladder and the primary means for breaking the cycle of poverty that is linked to higher levels of gun violence and death by homicide. The median income in the U.S. for a college graduate over the age of 25 is currently nearly $60,000; for someone with an associate’s degree it is $40,000; for someone with no high school diploma it is $24,000. We owe it to students like Samantha to at least give them the opportunity to pursue that degree if they so choose.

For those of us who are in education, there is a temptation when we learn of the death of a young person like Samantha to throw up our hands in despair and decide that what we do as educators doesn’t matter; to reach the conclusion that nothing we do in schools can trump what happens in the streets. But we must not succumb to that temptation because education not only matters, it matters profoundly.

It is altogether fitting that we react to Samantha’s death with sadness and anger. We should never reach the point where we accept the senseless death of one of our children as something normal. Indeed, we should feel a sense of outrage every time we hear that violence has claimed the life of another child. But the best way for us to express that outrage, and to honor Samantha and the other children whose lives have ended too soon, is to redouble our commitment to provide them with the kind of education that promotes positive, life-affirming norms like compassion, respect, and dignity for all, teaches peaceful means of resolving conflict, and imparts the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful in our 21st century world.
A FEW CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As I re-read these essays, two themes, or patterns, rise to the fore. First, I am struck by the frequency with which I use dualities to describe Outward Bound’s approach to teaching and learning, and even more so by how frequently these dualities consist of concepts that are seemingly in opposition to one another. And almost always, the feature of our educational approach that I am highlighting is the interplay between these two oppositional concepts. For example, contained in this book are disquisitions on the interplay between challenge and support, success and failure, intellect and character, and rigor and joy. Our teaching and learning approach is awash with paired concepts like these, whose interrelationships can be mined for nuggets of educational gold.

Newton’s third law of motion posits that in the natural world forces always occur in pairs and describes how force results from the interaction of two objects. Similarly, in the education world when two opposing concepts are joined together, there is a force—in the form of dynamic tension—that is generated. As educators our success is predicated to a significant degree on our ability to recognize these opposing forces, and how well we are able to harmonize them and manage to positive effect the tension they create. This is something that we at Outward Bound do with considerable relish and skill: we embrace dualities like challenge and support or success and failure, and we use the tension embedded within them as fuel to propel our students to higher levels of achievement.

When I do eventually step away from the work of NYC Outward Bound Schools I will want my legacy to be this: that I have been a good and faithful steward of Outward Bound’s approach to teaching and learning.

This willingness to acknowledge and work with dualities stands in stark contrast to the tendency one finds all too often in education these days to think strictly in binary terms: to frame, for example, the teaching of reading as a forced choice between a phonics or whole language approach, or, to see either charter schools or district schools as the one and only pathway to an outstanding education. But surely, teaching students to read well demands both phonics and whole language approaches, and both charter and district schools have something to contribute in defining educational excellence. One important lesson that I take from this book of essays is that we at NYC Outward Bound Schools reject false dichotomies like these in favor of a more inclusive, comprehensive approach which draws upon and synchronizes multiple elements, some of which may even at first glance seem to be in opposition to each other.
The second distinctive theme that emerges from these essays is stewardship. There are repeated references to the notion that we at NYC Outward Bound Schools are stewards of the Outward Bound approach to teaching and learning and therefore have a responsibility to bring the elements of that approach to life for our students with fidelity and care. We see ourselves as being entrusted with a time-tested educational approach that was first bequeathed to us by Outward Bound founder Kurt Hahn and has since been refined and strengthened in ways that make it powerfully aligned to the needs of young people in the 21st century.

As I approach the milestone of my 25th anniversary with NYC Outward Bound Schools, I am occasionally asked what I would like my legacy to be. It is something of a premature question because I still see important work ahead for me as the head of this organization. But when I do eventually step away from the work of NYC Outward Bound Schools I will want my legacy to be this: that I have been a good and faithful steward of Outward Bound’s approach to teaching and learning. If that is indeed my legacy, it will be a proud one because it will mean that I will have helped to bring a teaching and learning approach that so many people around the world have found to be transformational to two audiences that I care so deeply about: New York City’s young people and their public schools.

Over 25 years, as I have gotten more exposure to Outward Bound’s teaching and learning approach and seen it applied in more and more contexts, both my understanding and appreciation of it have grown correspondingly. I now have a better sense of its power because I am more fully cognizant of its different dimensions and how they work in concert with one another to provide educational experiences that bring out the best in students. I hope that through this book of essays I have succeeded in conveying some of that understanding. And I hope that you too now share my appreciation for an approach to education that is so remarkably effective in doing what our organizational tagline promises: “transforming schools and changing lives.”

Richard Stopol
Long Island City, NY
June 3, 2014
NYC Outward Bound Schools transforms schools and changes lives by bringing out the best in students, teachers and school leaders throughout New York City. We operate a five-borough network of public Expeditionary Learning schools, in partnership with the City’s Department of Education, which primarily target students from underserved neighborhoods. Our educational approach delivers academic rigor through active, real-world learning, develops character skills, inspires students to serve their communities, and instills in them the grit to overcome challenges. Our graduates succeed in more than just college and careers— they’re active citizens who make their communities better for all.

To further extend our impact, we also offer Adventure & Team Building programs to young people not enrolled in our network schools. And we provide professional development to schools interested in adopting specific best practices and approaches from our network schools. Both our schools and our programs impart the central lesson of Outward Bound: that all individuals, regardless of background or circumstance, can achieve at higher levels than they previously thought possible when given the right mix of challenge and support.

Since our inception in 1987, we have served over 60,000 young people from more than 300 public schools throughout the City. For virtually all of these young people, involvement with NYC Outward Bound Schools has resulted in profound learning, and for many, it has been transformational, helping them to discover just how capable they really are, individually and collectively.
“I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion.”

*Kurt Hahn, Founder, Outward Bound*