

### **Why is there a need for an outdoor education course at McGill University?**

Outdoor education is gaining momentum in Canada and Quebec. Will McGill seize the opportunity of being a part of this positive education metamorphosis? The growing popularity of outdoor education means that increasingly more youths will be able to reap the benefits associated with experiential learning and supported by an abundant amount of research (Hattie, Marsh, Neil, & Richards, 1997). Indeed, outdoor education has been shown to be a powerful and creative means of developing the physical, emotional, and social health of students. For example, outdoor education has been demonstrated to be an effective tool for increasing self-esteem, social skills, physical fitness, and environmental awareness (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007; Hattie et al., 1997). Furthermore, the escalation of student alienation from physical education and a greater disconnect with nature necessitates a modification of the curriculum, which takes into account the need for outdoor education (Mitchell & Socha, 2010).

Unfortunately, there are currently no English speaking outdoor education opportunities available for student teachers in Quebec. Among other advantages, the creation of an outdoor education course at McGill would consequently fill this void. Moreover, because of the nature of adventure-related fields, the establishment of an outdoor education course would have the effect of attracting undergraduate candidates who are motivated, respect the environment, and possess leadership qualities. Taking into consideration that a student teacher's curriculum is continually being upgraded and loaded, this outdoor education course could flexibly be integrated within the physical education program as an elective, one credit, 'Physical Activity' course.

Most importantly, in addition to being in the interest of the university, providing an experiential education course would better prepare future teachers to deliver appropriate content

to the most precious element of the education system, the youth. A student teacher who participates in such a class would develop qualities necessary for physical educators, such as superior decision-making, communication, and leading abilities (Hattie et al., 1997; Thom, 2002). Moreover, an experiential course at McGill would allow student teachers to learn and practice outdoor activities worthwhile for elementary and high school students. Indeed, Rose (2001) found that the enjoyment of students in physical education increased when teachers made use of creative outdoor activities.

**How would this course prepare student teachers to teach the Quebec Education Program (QEP) at the elementary and high school level?**

Although the QEP does not explicitly state the importance of integrating outdoor education within the physical education and health program, it has the potential to contribute substantially to students' success in physical education and overall personal development. A role model project which has in effect been able to establish an outdoor education curriculum for all grades, "while supporting the implementation of curriculum from the Quebec Education Program" is that of The Western Quebec School board (Earwaker, 2010). In point of fact, outdoor activities possess the flexibility of complying with the requirements of physical education and health dimension's three main competencies and cross-curricular competencies. For example, the cyclical activities, which the QEP proposes (e.g., cross country skiing and bicycling) involve components of outdoor education.

**Competency 1: Performs movement skills in different physical activity settings**

Competency one is not only related to performing movement skills, and can be further broken down into three segments, all of which can be taught and practiced within an outdoor

education curriculum. For example, the skill of analysing “the situation according to the requirements of the setting” can be implemented when a student is given the task of analysing how they will go about completing a high ropes obstacle course (QEP, n.d., p.11). Furthermore, in an outdoor education context, students are able to perform and improve movement skills with adventure challenges, which can readily be adapted to the skill level of every child. According to Thurber et al. (2007), adventure camps contributed greatly to the development of the psychomotor skills of participants. Most importantly, students would have the opportunity to evaluate their motor efficiency through a process which outdoor education practitioners term debriefing.

### **Competency 2: Interacts with others in different physical activity settings**

Although it is possible to participate in solo outdoor activities, teamwork is often a preferred approach towards achieving adventures in nature. In light of this, the three components of the competency to interact with others in different physical activity settings can easily be applied in the context of outdoor education. First, a plan of action can be developed when students are given an adventure-related task, for example, crossing a river using a disassembled raft. Furthermore, students can be invited to participate in an already established plan of action by snowshoeing to the summit of a mountain. Finally, students can evaluate plans of action, “recognise the contribution of teammates, [identify] with teammates what improvements can be made, [and explain] the reasons for achievements and difficulties” through debriefing sessions (QEP, n.d., p.16).

**Competency 3: Adopts a healthy, active lifestyle**

In order to fulfil the third competency and simultaneously encourage lifelong participation in physical activity, it is important to take into “account students’ interests by offering them a wide selection of physical activities that are likely to be practised in daily life, whether at school or elsewhere” (QEP, n.d., p.1). Individuals are more likely to participate in outdoor activities than organised team sports in adulthood (Rose, 2001). Consequently, it is more realistic to think that students will be able to follow their plan of action, developed in their last year of high school, if their choices of activities include outdoor activities. Unsurprisingly, outdoor education has the potential of covering the three aspects of the adopt a healthy, active lifestyle competency. By participating in outdoor activities, students can identify their “own tastes and aptitudes” and in the process develop their action plan for achieving or maintaining a healthy lifestyle (QEP, n.d., p.20). For example, students can discover if they prefer rock climbing, orienteering, or wilderness walking. Furthermore, students can carry out their plan by participating in the cyclical activities which they may have been initiated to during an adventure camp. Finally, through outdoor education, students can be guided towards evaluating their lifestyle habits (e.g., by comparing cardiovascular fitness before and after a camp).

**Connections with other subject areas**

“Reality can rarely be understood through the rigid logic of a single subject; rather, it is by bringing together several fields of knowledge that we are able to grasp its many facets.” (QEP, n.d., p.5). The QEP consequently encourages teachers to explore creative avenues which allow for learning ‘outside the box’ of specific disciplines. Coincidentally, an outdoor education focus has been demonstrated to fulfil this exact need. Hattie et al. (1997) found that after a unique

camp experience, mathematical and problem solving skills had improved. Furthermore, through an outdoor experience, numerous other subjects can be combined. For example, students can 'live' geography through an orienteering activity, polish their literary skills when writing a journal reflection after a hike, and use science tools to establish energy needs prior to a canoe trip.

### **Exemplar Outdoor Education Course**

Even though it would be realistic to integrate a week-end or longer camp within a university level outdoor education course, the time and cost constraint associated with one credit courses would more likely limit practical outdoor experiences to day trips within the Montreal area. A half-day hike on the neighbouring Mount Royal could follow three weeks of intensive lectures on the basic theories (e.g., adventure wave, challenge by choice, and flow theory) and safety issues important for outdoor practitioners. After demonstrating the rudiments of topology and compass usage, the field trip could focus on the activity of orienteering and could allow students to bond in small teams of four. The following two lectures could be used to reflect on the past experiences of students and examine environmental issues. The second field trip could take students cycling in the beautiful Lachine Canal Trails. Among other matters, the field trip could serve the purpose of demonstrating how outdoor activities can be easily integrated within a healthy lifestyle.

## References

- Earwaker, A. (2010). Mission Statement. Retrieved from [http://wqsb.qc.ca/environment/home\\_missionstatement.html](http://wqsb.qc.ca/environment/home_missionstatement.html)
- Department of Education and Training (DET) (2010, April 11). Guidelines for Specific Sports and Physical Activities. Retrieved from <http://www.sports.det.nsw.edu.au/spguide/activities/>
- Mitchell, B. & Socha, T. (2010). The Changing Climate of Outdoor Education in the Quebec CEGEP System. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 32(3), 261–265.
- Québec Education Program (QEP). (n.d). Personal Development: Physical Education and Health Dimension.
- Parkin, D. (1998). Is outdoor education environmental education? *The International Journal of Environmental Education and Information*, 17(3), 275-286.
- Rose, T. (2001). Incorporating the Outdoors in Physical Education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 72(6), 17-18.
- Thom, G. (2002). Evaluation of Pilot Summer Activities Programme for 16 Year Olds (DfES Research Report 341). London: DfES.
- Thurber, C. A., Scanlin, M. M., Scheuler, L. & Henderson K. A. (2007). Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience: Evidence for Multidimensional Growth. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 36, 241–254.