

Tree Houses and Outdoor Education.**The Realization of a Childhood Dream in a Successful Outdoor Educational Concept****Sam Brüngger, Stefan Westhauser, Germo Zimmermann**

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Abstract

The hands-on approach of outdoor education has boomed in the past decades. Outdoor educational activities such as climbing, canoeing, archery, outdoor-cooking, hiking, cooperative adventure games, high and low ropes courses, orienteerings and wilderness treks as well as winter activities (snowshoe hiking, igloo-building) are being employed in different fields of youth work and work with children. “Outdoor education plays an important role in leisure and learning opportunities proffered by associations, clubs, church-run institutions or sponsors of youth welfare services. This is also the case in public child and youth work, youth centers, play castles, adventure playgrounds or one-time projects such as the ‘holiday adventure city’” (Pfaffrath, 2013, p. 167).¹ This trend has long since also arrived in denominational youth work. Within the YMCA there are different local associations that currently built treehouses with their participants and use this building process as a method for Outdoor Education and Christian Youth Work. This current article focuses on the concept of YMCA-Treehouses in Europe and shows the historical, educational and psychological backgrounds of this concept.

Keywords: Outdoor Education – Youth Work – Treehouse – Spirituality – Experiential Learning

¹ All quotes are translated from the German original. Many thanks to Christy Kreikebaum.

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1. An old dream comes true

Humankind has been building tree houses for centuries. The Korowai Indians in Indonesia used them as a safeguard against wild animals or enemy tribes. The Roman ruler Caligula (12-41 A.D.), on the other hand, hosted lavish feasts in his tree house, and the Persian poet Anvari (1126–1189) retreated to his tree house to meditate between heaven and earth (cf. Henderson & Mornement 2005, pp12ff). The first popular children's book that dealt with the building of a tree house was published 1812: *The Swiss Family Robinson, or the Shipwrecked Swiss Preacher and his Family*.

Building a tree house is a dream that many children have, but which comes true for only very few. This article explains how this dream can be successfully and comprehensively realized in outdoor education. The association Outdoortech has been building tree houses with diverse target groups for more than 15 years. In this article we summarize our tree house building experience and explain how we proceed in such projects.

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Picture 1 - Tree House Project with Bridges and Stairs

2. The Concept that has been Successfully Tested all over Europe

The group Outdoortech implemented its first tree house projects in the Swiss YMCA fifteen years ago as communal youth work. In collaboration with the promoter Buiten-deur, the YMCA in Holland adopted our concept in 2009. On the occasion of a European youth festival in the Czech Republic in 2013, a tree house was built that housed more than one hundred and twenty people from five different countries. Since then, the tree house building method has spread all over Europe. By now, many different outdoor educational tree house

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camps are also taking place in Germany, primarily sponsored and implemented by the YMCA. The first international training camp for tree house trainers was held in Michelstadt in 2015. With thirty-nine participants from eleven different countries it was a full success (cf. Kölbel, 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2016). The Department of Outdoor Education at the YMCA University in Kassel in cooperation with Outdoortech is responsible for coordinating and cross-linking the various German tree house camps. The YMCA University is also in the planning stages of developing an advanced course for tree house trainers (Widmann, 2016).

Outdoor educational tree houses are fully habitable houses in the trees. They are designed for sleeping, cooking and living together; they are constructed with and for the participants of building camps that last ten days to two weeks. The appropriate framework and setting for tree houses and tree house camps – as well as for huts made from foliage, shanties and ranger beds – is outdoor education in the natural environment of the woods. Their attraction is their ability to open the door to intense experiences that smack of adventure. These experiences materialize while collectively building plateaus, seating areas, ramps, stairs, swings and restrooms at lofty heights and also while living together in the self-built tree house. In all it is imperative to help the participants process their experiences in a way that subserves the maturation of their personalities. The relevant pedagogical areas that these experiences fall into include height, personal boundaries, safety and technology, teamwork, manual and planning tasks, and environmental sustainability education (cf. Zimmermann et al., 2016).

The Outdoortech tree house camps generally last two weeks. The first week is the construction phase, and the second is reserved for inhabiting the tree house. On the first day, the participants are introduced to the building technique and the applicable safety rules. This instruction is given no later than at the first platform to be built. Concurrently, a simple

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temporary camp is set up in the woods; the camp is abandoned as soon as the tree house is ready to be occupied. Plans and exact conceptions of what the tree house will look like when it is done do not exist. The plan evolves during the building process. This approach triggers comprehensive learning processes and promotes good personality development in the participants (cf. Pfaffrath 2013, p. 140).

Building platforms is the main focus during the first few days. Bridges, stairs and ladders are built in the second phase. In the third and final building phase, the participants concentrate their creative efforts on the interior design of their future dwelling. The participants' resources shape the building process. Everyone is needed. Be it to cut the logs to size, to be a climber or to fixate the mighty beams with ropes and knots. The import of resource orientation is that every participant has his part to play in the project; everyone contributes to the overall outcome. Some might have their own special area of expertise, and others simply do whatever they are especially good at (cf. Zuffelato & Kreszmeier, 2007, p. 135). Moreover, because language isn't necessary to convey the know-how for the many manual tasks, people from foreign cultures – refugees, for example – can easily be integrated in the building process, as the YMCA in Berlin, for example, has proven with its project (Trautwein, 2016). Individuals with learning disabilities can perform various tasks as well.

The conclusion of the building phase is duly celebrated with a topping-out ceremony, to which parents, friends and interested acquaintances may be invited. The participants can proudly show their guests the tree house they built. Thus they can reap commendation and esteem not only from the other participants, but also from their relatives. One tremendous benefit, then, of building a tree house, is that the builders get to realize their self-efficacy in various ways.

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The second week is reserved for living in the tree house. The learning the participants have gleaned from their building experiences is solidified in new tasks and responsibilities. The second week resembles a camp in the woods. It facilitates, above all, learning in nature that is long-term. A fundamentally positive attitude towards nature can develop, as well as the confidence in one's ability to handle adverse weather conditions successfully and safely (cf. Bach & Bach, 2011, p. 32).

The dismantling of the tree house is part of the project's conception, as well: The tree houses we build are not intended for continued use. Our central concern here is that as few traces as possible remain in nature when our activities have been concluded. The dismantling takes place within the context of ecological ethics (cf. Heckmair & Michl, 2004 pp. 252ff) and in accordance with our systematic understanding of outdoor education. Our slogan is expressed in the song *Nothing But* by John Kay (1977): "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints. "In the context of outdoor education, however, these pictures should be primarily memories, as Zuffelato und Kreszmeier have rightly noted (cf. Zuffelato & Kreszmeier, 2007, p. 108).

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Picture 2 - Living in one's own tree house

3. The Comprehensive Educational Approach

The tree house building process complies with various established structural features of outdoor educational learning scenarios (cf. Pfaffrath, 2013, pp. 83ff): It presents the builders with situations that are real and seriously challenging, but adventuresome. These situations facilitate learning beyond one's comfort zone, in all kinds of weather and at lofty heights. As communal youth work, most of the tree house projects up to date targeted young people between 14 and 22 years of age. The participants' gender distribution was approximately 40% female and 60% male.

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The active building process and the learning by doing manner of tackling the tasks in the tree house camps open up spheres of experience that can facilitate action-oriented and experiential learning. The holistic nature of building in a team, in nature and with all five senses promotes the participants' cognitive, emotional, motoric and action learning. The various tasks fulfill the principles of resource orientation and person-centeredness, both foundational in youth work as well as outdoor education (cf. Zimmermann, 2016). The basic approach is also growth-oriented instead of deficit-oriented; this empowers the participants to discover their developmental potential and to realize their self-efficacy, both on the basis of their personal strengths. The interaction with the social group, which in our context is the team and the other participants, facilitates this process. The group constitutes a sphere in which simultaneously experiences can be gathered and learning can take place: "It offers ample opportunities for dialogic learning, binding experiences, conflict resolution" (Pfaffrath, 2013, p. 88). The participants can grow by assuming responsibility for themselves and others through observing the safety rules. The tree house can only be built collectively; a solo effort is futile. The teamwork demands cooperation and good communication, and the ability to accept compromises. A non-directive educational approach promotes these skills best. It encourages participation and responsible as well as self-directing behavior (trial and error) in every individual in the group. Because the building is strenuous and physically challenging, the participants quickly reach the limits of their physical endurance. Experiences that bring the learner to his or her personal limits are a central structural feature of outdoor educational activities.

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Safety Considerations

Anyone who works with ropes in outdoor education must be experienced and know his stuff (cf. Pfaffrath 2013, p. 115). Being familiar with the different kinds of rope is especially important in the tree house building sector, because relevant standards currently don't exist. Tree house trainers receive their training in special camps. Guided by experienced instructors, they receive excellent on-the-job training. Qualified experiential learning educators, climbing experts and people from mechanical professions make up the leadership teams. The interdisciplinary nature of these teams enables them to ensure a comprehensive safety environment in the camps, namely one that takes into account both expert technical and systemic aspects. Every project is also planned and reviewed with Outdoortech's security scheme (cf. Brüngger&Lüthi, 2015, pp. 12ff).

Great emphasis is placed on creating and sustaining a comprehensive safety environment in the camps, by the participants as well as the team. The objective is to coach self-efficacy, confidence and independence in the participants. The tasks and responsibilities are allocated in such a way as to ensure that every participant is challenged to a certain degree and can thus experience empowering successes (cf. Zuffelato&Kreszmeier, 2007, p. 250).

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Picture 3 - Safety is highly emphasized

4. The Psychological Impact of Tree Houses

As described in the introduction, the obvious impact that tree houses have on those who dwell in or visit them has long been made use of. Nelson comments:

“Their language is ancient, the message universal: Climb up and step [sic] into harmony with nature: abandon all earthly strains and be free [...]. A transforming power is inherent to tree houses: The moment [sic] one crosses their threshold, one becomes a different person. In the heights [...] the soul grows young again and the spirit light” (cf. Nelson, 2009, p. 8).

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In the classic work of outdoor educational literature, *The Conscious Use of Metaphor in Outward Bound*, Stephen Bacon explains that humans are subconsciously primed to recognize archetypal patterns, wherever in the world they encounter them (cf. Bacon 2003, p. 91). The archetypal significance of “climbing aloft ‘or of’ building one’s own house” can effectively be made use of when building a tree house.

Many further interesting metaphors can be found in a tree house project besides. As observed by Rainer Dietrich, information is learned and retained better if it is conveyed metaphorically (cf. Dietrich, 2004, p. 29).

5. Great Potential

The tree house building method has proven itself especially advantageous in:

- Promoting participation
- Building self-efficacy
- Inspiring creativity
- Strengthening the participants’ sense of responsibility
- Encouraging initiative and the assumption of responsibility
- Helping the participants to discover hidden resources
- Training cooperative behavior
- Experiencing joy
- Experiencing motivation and conferring it to others
- Supporting cognitive development.

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This list is not complete. One great benefit of this experiential learning approach is that the participants 'very divergent resources can be integrated in the building process. While our technologically progressive society marginalizes their abilities, this method lets manually skilled participants shine. Günther Lücking (2015, p. 26) points out that the tree house building concept as a holistic approach is very appropriate to Christian youth work because principles important for living successfully such as responsibility, solidarity, esteem for oneself and others, environmental sustainability and self-restraint can be addressed in a very practical and interactive way instead of being merely discussed (see also Ossenberg-Engels, 2016).

Although many tree house hotels exist worldwide, outdoor educational projects that make use of tree houses as an educational instrument are rather rare and unheard-of. Nonetheless, great potential is inherent to this experiential learning method. But several different factors will determine if it can become widely accepted and employed. For example, depending on the project location, the necessary legal clarifications are currently extremely laborious. All the legal issues involved often can't be conclusively settled. The development of norms and standards for tree house projects is a current imperative. And an in-depth expert dialogue will be necessary before these standards can be developed. Thus, the clarification of legal and technical conditions is as desirable as it is necessary in order to employ the tree house building method as an outdoor educational instrument on a larger scale (cf. Gatt, Libicky & Stockert, 2006).

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