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# Through the Phorofter: A reflective analysis of one practitioner's attempt to sequence social and emotional learning competencies into an experiential learning program

Stephanie A. Globus-Hoenich  
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RUNNING HEAD: Through the Phorofter: A Reflective Analysis

Through the Phorofter

A reflective analysis of one practitioner's attempt to sequence social and emotional learning competencies into an experiential learning program

Stephanie Globus-Hoenich

PIM 74

Training Course-Linked-Capstone: Training Design for Experiential Learning and Training of Trainers

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Intercultural Service Leadership and Management at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro,

Vermont, USA

Capstone Seminar Start Date: May 22, 2017

Advisor: Ryland White

## Through the Phorofter: A Reflective Analysis

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Student Name: Stephanie Globus-Hoenich

Date: May 22, 2017

## Dedication & Acknowledgements

To Ryan and our future together. Thank you for balancing my logic with your empathy, and for supporting me with grace, wisdom, love, and laughter.

To my family for their unconditional support and love, and for telling me what I need to hear, instead of what I want to hear.

To my friends near and far for helping me become the person I am today.

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# Through the Phoropter: A Reflective Analysis

## ABSTRACT

This capstone is a reflective analysis of social and emotional learning programming and its implementation in traditional Western schools. It approaches the question of sequencing social and emotional competencies for instruction through experiential learning. Initially I sought a linear rationale in order to better understand my work in implementing a social and emotional learning program in nearby Keene, New Hampshire through High 5 Adventure Learning Center's Edge of Leadership program. However, my inquiry shifted in light of several ethical implications that arise from the prospect of constraining social and emotional learning into a pre-set curriculum.

As a Course-Linked Capstone, this project draws from coursework and resources from Training Design for Experiential Learning and Training of Trainers: Ethics and Intercultural Training Design. It connects my coursework with my experiences in the field through several practicum positions, each interacting with social and emotional learning in different ways. Over the course of this project, I have learned a great deal about myself as a trainer, facilitator, and designer, as well as the ways in which the ethics that guide my training practice have allowed me to remain critical of the work I do on a daily basis.

The 'phoropter' referenced in both the title and Part III of this capstone project refers to an instrument used by ophthalmologists to identify a patient's exact eyeglass prescription. For the purposes of this paper, the phoropter symbolizes two crucial elements of this reflective analysis: the lens through which social and emotional learning can be viewed, in my opinion, as well as the reflective practice process which helps me as a training practitioner see my practice more clearly, working each and every day towards 20/20 vision.

## Through the Phoropter: A Reflective Analysis

### Acronym Key

SEL: Social and emotional learning  
CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning  
ELC: Experiential Learning Cycle  
EOL: Edge of Leadership  
TDEL: Training Design for Experiential Learning  
TOT: Training of Trainers: Ethics and Intercultural Training Design  
WSESU: Windham County Supervisory Union  
CONTACT: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures  
ASPIRE: Afterschool Program for Inspiration Recreation and Education  
SIT: School for International Training



## **Introduction**

### **Background and Context**

It's fair to say I found my way to the field of training design and experiential education by accident. Prior to attending SIT in the fall of 2014, I lived abroad teaching English as a volunteer in Costa Rica, sure I wanted a master's degree but unsure in what. By the time I found SIT, I knew at the very least I wanted to immerse myself in a small academic culture which would allow me to self-design a degree with a focus on youth empowerment. My professional experience prior to SIT revolved around direct-service with youth, from my two-year teaching stint to mentoring young athletes and working as a camp counselor. My passion was for sport- and play-based learning, which came from my experiences on my university's rugby team, a place where I developed leadership skills, a heightened social awareness, and a self-confidence I had not known before. In my experience the power of the women's sports team was immense, and I wanted to learn to harness that power for positive youth engagement and empowerment. This desire brought me to SIT and eventually to my first Training Design for Experiential Learning (TDEL) class in September of 2014 where I hoped to combine my previous experience with a theoretical understanding of youth development.

Prior to TDEL, I had never heard of experiential education as a field of study, let alone adventure or outdoor education, the field I am in today. Had I known, I would likely have pursued this line of work sooner, building a repertoire of experience in the world of challenge courses as a place where my passions for teams intersects with the experiential learning cycle. Coincidentally, the professional goal I stated in my September 2014 learning plan foretells the job I began in August of 2016: "I envision working for a non-profit organization that interacts directly with young people on the front lines, teaching them about leadership, trust, and bridge building through play." (Globus-Hoenich, p.1). This description is uncannily close to the work I

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do today for the High 5 Adventure Learning Center right here in Brattleboro. How I managed to make it to such a seemingly perfect fit for my passions took lots of networking, patience, and a touch of serendipity. Plainly stated, I knew the right people at the right time.

### **Finding My Way to the Edge of Leadership**

By the end of the summer of 2015 I had no plan or practicum beyond the month-long CONTACT program at SIT for which I was a Program Assistant. I desperately needed to figure out next steps. I could move back to Canada and search for work from the rent-free home base of my parent's house, or I could take a chance on Brattleboro that the connections I'd made through my work as Community Liaison with the SLM department at SIT might see me through to more permanent practicum-fulfilling employment. I chose the latter, and sure enough my work experience within the local school district parlayed into two part-time positions right in town, both of which allowed me to design and facilitate programming, interact with youth on a daily basis, and fulfill my practicum requirements. In the mornings I worked as the Youth Programming Coordinator for the Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC) where my responsibilities included creating a peer-mentorship program for high school and middle school students involved in leadership teams, sustaining existing youth programs, and designing and facilitating workshops for the semi-annual Student Leadership Conference of the local Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU). During afternoons and into the early evening I worked as Site Director for an afterschool enrichment program at a local elementary school through the Meeting Waters YMCA's Afterschool Program for Inspiration, Recreation and Education (ASPIRE). There my responsibilities included designing and facilitating daily programming for

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22 children grades K-5, supervising and mentoring a Program Assistant, meeting state requirements for school aged care, and ensuring a safe, nurturing environment for all students.

While my two positions were very different, both gave me ample opportunity to grow and develop my understanding and application of experiential education, training design, and program planning. At ASPIRE, with the freedom to design my own curriculum, I was able to focus on play-based learning and facilitated free play. Each day I approached our time together as an opportunity for building social and emotional skills through our time on the playground and in the classroom, fostering connections and community in our little inter-grade group. With BAPC I had the opportunity to connect with high schoolers and deepen my understanding of the field of prevention. I had the privilege of attending conferences and trainings on implementing youth prevention programs that focus on social and emotional skill building as a means of increasing youth resilience and positive development. Over time my experience with BAPC ultimately formed the foundation for my current work in social and emotional learning (SEL). Paralleled by the fact that social and emotional learning programs in schools grew out of the prevention field, which I will discuss later, my current work in the Keene, New Hampshire school district through High 5 Adventure Learning Center's Edge of Leadership (EOL) program is greatly informed by my experience in prevention with BAPC.

In August of 2016 I was recruited out of my positions with BAPC and ASPIRE by High 5. Also located in Brattleboro, High 5 is a small educational non-profit using experiential education, adventure, and challenge course technologies as tools for training practitioners, building community, and developing leadership skills in youth. The EOL program, for which I am a Teacher, is a specialty program that interfaces with 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders in the Keene school district on a bi-weekly to monthly basis, as well as high schoolers throughout their school year

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and for an intensive three-day overnight program in the summer. In my role, I work closely on a team of three to develop and deliver EOL programming, a process that for me has led to considerable growth as a training design practitioner and facilitator. Not only have I had the opportunity to use a challenge course as a tool for leadership training, I have the daily opportunity to delve into training design and rationale, a process that lead me to the current inquiry at hand.

### **A Question Arises**

EOL is in a perpetual state of growth and development. A fundamental aspect of the program is that was not initially designed as a set curriculum that is written up once and replicated. The approach to EOL has always been that each day informs the next, and programming is intentional and carefully devised with big picture goals and directions considered at every point in the process. At the same time, and as an illustration of the continual growth and change the program experiences, EOL is gaining more and more support in the Keene school district, and discussions have turned to solidifying a space for it within the district-wide curriculum. This prospect has major implications from a training ethics point of view, which I will explore in this capstone project.

Otherwise, on a daily planning basis, conversations within the office weave in and out of technical program aspects and practical applications within each classroom we visit in Keene. As the newest member of the team I am positioned to learn about the program's design and facilitation and often find myself in an observational role within the classroom. In the office, however, I feel comfortable exploring EOL's design rationales. One particular conversation during the planning phase led me to question EOL's approach to different competencies,

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particularly the sequence of social and emotional learning topics within the larger program framework. My colleagues described the previous year's sequence in 5<sup>th</sup> grade of exploring the theme of emotional literacy prior to exploring trust and trustworthiness. This year's approach was to be the inverse (trust followed by emotions), based on experiences from last year and what we were seeing thus far this school year. An argument could be made for either sequence. On one hand, you need to build trust between people in order to discuss sensitive things like our emotions. On the other hand, our emotions affect our behaviors and our behaviors in turn determine whether others perceive us as worthy of their trust. Working at building a collective emotional literacy can help us express emotions and read emotions in others so that we may learn the behaviors that lead to trustworthiness. Undeniably, the skills we strive to develop in our participants overlap and intertwine deeply and fluidly. This particular conundrum, however, raised the curiosity of what theories dictate our program's sequence.

Consequently, this was not the first time a question of this nature arose for me. During my time at BAPC I was tasked with reframing the social competency curriculum for the WSESU district here in Brattleboro, and was faced with the same consideration. The social competency curriculum is not unlike social and emotional competencies explored in EOL, which I will discuss shortly, as both share roots in the same grounding philosophies and research. In this case, however, my confusion regarded how to phrase and depict core competencies for instruction and exploration by WSESU district's student leadership teams. In the case of the WSESU, I was dealing with the competencies as overarching themes to be used as a tool by educators, not organizing them into a framework from which to derive competency-specific lessons. Simplifying the language would allow students and educators to grasp the social competency curriculum better than they had in the past, and leadership team facilitators could base their

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lessons and projects off of them. For EOL, the task is much more involved. Our program is a social and emotional skill building program over the course of a school year that involves a number of stakeholders both within and outside of the school district who are invested in the efficacy of our programming over the long term. As such there is immense pressure to ensure that our programming is content-driven, thoughtful and cohesive. To me, this means that our programming should be based in a comprehensive rationale and that every program decision is made in accordance to theory as it relates to practice and practice as it relates to theory.

However, when the decision was made this year to sequence trust prior to emotions I began to question why. To me this decision was not based in any particular theory or rationale and did not satisfy my desire to understand why we sequence social and emotional lesson themes in the order in which we do. This question has formed the basis of my capstone project.

In seeking an answer to this question, I will link theories and resources from both TDEL and Training of Trainers (TOT) with my experiences throughout my practicum work and beyond. My trainer lens has been shaped by the works of bell hooks and Paulo Freire, both of whom I was first exposed to during my time on campus at SIT. Their teachings have helped guide my approach to training, facilitation, and design on a daily basis. In particular, hooks' engaged pedagogy and writings on conflict in the classroom weigh in heavily on the conclusions I draw in this capstone project. Freire's critical liberatory pedagogies of freedom and the oppressed also inform my trainer lens as I look to develop my knowledge, skills, and awareness of social justice education. This is apparent throughout my inquiry as I weave theory through my experience, striving to develop and refine my personal praxis. I will consider the literature on social and emotional learning as a means to situate my inquiry within the larger field of study. I will then present my answer to my posed question and explain the rationale behind my decision.

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The ethics that guide my training practice and the cultural implications of my work will be explored as I reflect upon the future of the EOL program which seeks a permanent home in the Keene district's curriculum map. I will connect social and emotional learning sequencing to my work at EOL through the lens of several guiding theoretical frameworks and explain why I believe EOL's approach to be an appropriate means of bringing social and emotional learning into a traditional western education system. Ultimately, I will reflect upon my experiences completing this capstone project, and how I have grown professionally as a facilitator and program designer, as well as a student of training and a lifelong learner. It is important for me to be clear that for the purposes of this capstone I have focused my inquiry upon our 5<sup>th</sup> grad program as opposed to our 7<sup>th</sup> or high school programs. This is because it is the one program that is the most practiced and documented, as opposed to 7<sup>th</sup> grade which is in early discovery stages, and high school which follows a different format.

It is my hope that this inquiry contributes to the field by addressing an area with little focus to date, particularly how to sequence SEL on a curricular level and through a trainer lens. My experiences throughout my practicum positions and in my current work inform this inquiry, and through it I hope to continue learning about and understanding the field of SEL and its connection to training, as it is a field I see myself in for years to come. More than anything, however, this capstone inquiry illustrates just how much my learnings from training courses attended while at SIT have come to life through my practice, and how much there is yet to learn.

## **Part I: The Case for Social and Emotional Learning: A Literature Review**

“‘How did my trigonometry course help me to become a better human being?’ an echo answers,  
‘By gosh, it didn’t!’” –Abraham Maslow (1971, p. 164)

Exploring the literature pertaining to social and emotional learning (SEL) has tremendously guided my growth and understanding of the field in which I work. Theories, research, and hard science backing SEL are numerous. Many have explored SEL, its value, and how it can be and has been implemented in both schools and communities across the United States. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), viewed as the leading research organization in the field of SEL, defines it as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (2016 n.p.). Author and CASEL co-founder Daniel Goleman’s body of work traces SEL from its origins in Greek philosophy to its emergence from cognitive behavior theory and brain development, into its application in school, community and the workplace. Though his repertoire is still growing, Goleman’s prolific 1995 contribution, *Emotional Intelligence*, turned a spotlight on the concept of a particular set of skills and abilities that could greatly determine a child’s success in school and the working world. This was developed in large part as a response to the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), which Goleman and others viewed as a narrow-minded approach to determining success. IQ was understood to determine one’s destiny, unchangeable by life experience, and not adequately accounting for social behavior (p. xii). To address these



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shortcomings, SEL grew and developed into what it is today: a body of research and programs readily applied to schools and communities in an attempt to raise successful young people who will actively participate in communities, civil society, and democracy (Cohen 2006, CASEL 2017, Goleman 1995, 1998, 2006).

### **SEL's Roots in Prevention**

Over the past several decades, SEL's reach within school systems has grown out of the realm of prevention education. From a prevention standpoint, SEL vastly contributes to gains in Developmental Assets, a framework of competencies that promote healthy development and decrease multiple risk factors from mental health and substance abuse to sexual, violent, and criminal behavior and so on (Search Institute 2017, Goleman 1995, Durlak et al 2011, Elias 2003). In fact, SEL program implementation has a deep connection to school-based prevention programs, which were historically designed to target specific problems and focused primarily on increasing participants' knowledge, an approach since proven ineffective. A study of prevention programs found that they are "far more effective when they teach a core of emotional and social competences, such as impulse control, managing anger, and finding creative solutions to social predicaments" (Goleman 1995, p. 262). Kress & Elias (2006) add support to a departure from knowledge-based programs: "unlike many 'categorical' prevention programs that targeted specific problems, SEL programming could address underlying causes of problem behavior while supporting academic achievement" (p. 593).

This widened frame of reference contributed greatly to the increase of SEL implementation in schools, as prevention was a strategic avenue for the introduction of new programming. The goal has been to introduce SEL as pertinent to the learning process of school

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overall, in particular placing the same emphasis on SEL that academic classes already enjoy, thus making the emotional literacy and the social lives of children a topic of study in and of itself (Goleman 1995, Kress & Elias 2006). Such an approach, taking hold at the heart of the No Child Left Behind era in the United States, proved more needed than perhaps anticipated: “Just as the education field seemed to be focusing on ‘back to the basics’ in terms of both skills and learning approaches, the SEL field was uncovering reasons why genuine learning required attention to other factors” (Kress& Elias 2006, p. 593-594).

As prevention programs develop Developmental Assets, SEL builds upon five core competencies of its own, each equally as important as the next. Figure 1 depicts the competencies as put forth by CASEL.

**Figure 1**



CASEL also provides descriptions of each core competency and the skills one hones through the mastery of each. Table 1 depicts this information, which is taken from CASEL’s webpage.

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**Table 1**

<b>Competency Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Skills</b>
<b>Self-awareness</b>	The ability to accurately recognize one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one’s strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a “growth mindset.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify emotions</li> <li>• Accurate self-perception</li> <li>• Recognize strengths</li> <li>• Self-confidence</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> </ul>
<b>Self-management</b>	The ability to successfully regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations – effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work towards personal and academic goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impulse control</li> <li>• Stress management</li> <li>• Self-discipline</li> <li>• Self-motivation</li> <li>• Goal-setting</li> <li>• Organizational skills</li> </ul>
<b>Social awareness</b>	The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective-taking</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Appreciating diversity</li> <li>• Respect for others</li> </ul>
<b>Relationship skills</b>	The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Social engagement</li> <li>• Relationship-building</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> </ul>
<b>Responsible decision-making</b>	The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying problems</li> <li>• Analyzing situations</li> <li>• Solving problems</li> <li>• Evaluating</li> <li>• Reflecting</li> <li>• Ethical responsibility</li> </ul>

(CASEL 2017 n.p.)

### **The Value of SEL and its Role in Education**

Across the board, SEL is viewed as an integral and invaluable piece of the education puzzle. Decades before SEL was a refined field, Abraham Maslow In *The Farthest Reaches of Human Nature* summarized education and the human goal as the search for self-actualization, or “helping the person become the best that he is able to become” (1971, p. 163). He went on to discuss the experiences that influenced him greater than any traditional western academic education could, going so far as to state that traditional education stands as a barrier to self-actualizing:

If one thinks in terms of the developing of the kinds of wisdom, the kinds of understanding, the kinds of life skills that we would want, then he must think in terms of what I would like to call *intrinsic* learning; that is, learning to be a human being in general ... Once you start thinking in this framework, that is, in terms of becoming a good human being, and if then you ask the question about the courses that you took in high school, ‘How did my trigonometry course help me to become a better human being?’ an echo answers, ‘By gosh, it didn’t!’ (1971, p. 164).

Like other thinkers, Maslow posits traditional western education as fundamentally lacking an SEL component. Both Paulo Freire of Maslow’s generation, and Jeff Brooks-Harris & Susan Stock-Ward (1999) and Peter Allison (2003), from more recent years, comment on the dichotomous nature of traditional education. For Freire it’s the banking system in which teachers are narrators and students are receptacles of knowledge (2009 p. 72). Allison’s notions are similar, using the terminology of “sender” and “receiver” of information. He writes, “traditional

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education systems tend to consider knowledge transmission as the primary purpose...the great majority of systems involve the educators as the front of knowledge and the students as the recipients of that knowledge” (2003 p. 17). But one *kind* of knowledge is prioritized over others, a notion which Maslow, Allison, and Goleman, and others agree upon. For Cohen (2006), traditional western approaches to school focus primarily on knowledge, even civic-based knowledge, which leaves children lacking the vital *skills* and dispositions needed to be engaged members of our world: “along with an informed citizenry, a democratic society must reflect a respect for others, and ability to collaborate, regard for fairness and justice, concern for the commonwealth, as well as voluntary, active participation in society” (p. 203). One publication sums up this sentiment succinctly: “clearly a singular focus on traditional academics is insufficient to cope with the demands of modern society [...] schools have a ‘moral and ethical imperative’ to take responsibility for students’ well-being, not just their academic knowledge” (Fried 2015, p.2).

Today the argument isn’t such a simple two-sided one. Increasingly, SEL programs are being implemented into typical mainstream academic learning spaces, which have been shown to not only bolster children’s social and emotional competency development, but also improve academic performance and contribute to decreased participation in risky behaviors. SEL has been shown to improve academic gains by 11% when it is implemented into both academics, school and community culture (Durlak et al 2011 p. 13). This correlates to the assertion that “helping children improve their self-awareness and confidence, manage disturbing emotions and impulses, and increase their empathy pays off not just in improved behavior but in measurable academic achievement” (Goleman n.d, n.p.). The evidence is ample to support SEL’s value and

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place within the education system. *How* exactly a long-term SEL program should be designed, however, is a question that arises naturally for me from a trainer lens.

### **SEL, Experiential Learning Theory, and a Gap in the Literature**

In my work each day, the principles of experiential learning and SEL weave in and out of one another throughout both program design and facilitation. John Dewey's transformational philosophies offer a seamless link between both concepts, which provides clarity and direction for much of the work I do. In his *Experience and Education*, Dewey discusses the shortcoming of traditional education, which he summarized as a scheme to impose knowledge and skills "from above and from outside," and "beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess" (1938, p. 18, 19). His response to such a scheme is a progressive educational approach that honours the experiences of pupils within any classroom. In some ways Dewey's points differ distinctly from those of Maslow, although both argue for experiential learning in his own way. Dewey explains that his arguments are not to condemn traditional education: "it is to emphasize the fact, first, that young people in traditional schools do have experiences; and, secondly, that the trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong character—wrong and defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience" (p.27).

Dewey's simple recognition of experiences in the classroom supports the implementation of SEL into traditional western schools, because SEL is a process of experiencing, exploring, and reflecting upon common situations and interactions throughout the course of a young person's day. As Goleman says, bringing SEL into schools "makes emotions and social life themselves topics, rather than treating these most compelling facets of a child's day as irrelevant intrusions"

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(1995, p. 263). Furthermore, the work I do on a daily basis with SEL is guided by the principles of experiential learning as well as David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC), particularly structuring activities for concrete experience and debrief sessions for reflective observation, analysis, and practical learning. As a facilitator, using the ELC allows me to provide learning beyond the content-laden curriculum students manoeuvre daily. As Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward explain, an experiential education facilitator's role is one of "creating powerful learning experiences and guiding and encouraging personal and interpersonal learning" in order to "create change that complements and creates greater and deeper learning than merely providing information" (1999, p. 7).

CASEL suggests that effective approaches to teaching SEL are active and provide ample opportunities to practice and apply the skills depicted in Table 1. That SEL instruction be sequenced into "connected and coordinated activities to foster skill development" (2017, n.p.) is also stated expressly by CASEL, yet I have been hard pressed to find a rationale for a specific social emotional competency instruction sequence. The competencies put forth by CASEL are depicted in a pie chart, with each competency occupying an equal slice, as we saw in Figure 1. The implication is that each competency is of equal relevance and importance, that none comes before the other. Goleman, however, does reference an innate hierarchy within *emotional intelligence capacities*, which only slightly differ from CASEL's competencies: "the emotional intelligence capacities build upon one another. For example, self-awareness is crucial for self-regulation and empathy; self-regulation and self-awareness contribute to motivation; all the first four are at work in social skills" (1998, p. 28). This notion makes sense, but with so many overlapping aspects of each competency, Goleman also does not offer a practical path or sequence by which to bolster them.

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One meta-analysis of SEL programs found that the most effective programs (with effectiveness determined by positive changes in children's behavior and mental health) used sequenced learning activities and teaching skills in a systematic way. This finding suggests there is great benefit to "a coordinated sequence of activities that link the learning steps and provide youth with opportunities to connect these steps" (Durlak et al 2011). The same study found that effective programs use explicit objectives that are specific to SEL and not just in reference to positive behavior in general. Again, however, it is not determined in what order and sequence to approach SEL competencies on a broader programmatic scale.

Consulting existing SEL programs in search of a common sequence has also failed to reveal a particular pattern of competency instruction. Cleveland, Ohio's Metropolitan School District's SEL program, for example, delineates the same competency areas across pre-kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in their fifty-page SEL scope and sequence document (2012). Their program is broken into three main goals, which remain the same grade after grade. What changes over the course of learning quarters and grades is the depth to which each competency is explored and the process objectives. For example, both kindergarten and 10<sup>th</sup> grade have the same goal of "use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships." In kindergarten, during the early first quarter, this goal is reached by naming classmates, recognizing acceptable methods to gain assistance, and identifying appropriate strategies to enter and exit from group play and activities (p. 3). In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the goal remains the same but the objectives have deepened, presumably in accordance with child development, to including committing to using greater discretion in identifying friends and developing friendships, and developing skills for separating yourself from people who are not interested in seeing you succeed (p.39). I use this example to demonstrate this particular approach to SEL, but



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it does not offer me a sequence, rather a framework for integrating SEL into everyday instruction. I am still left wondering what rationale EOL could apply to its sequence of SEL instruction, as it is a theme-based program.

This literature review shows that much research can be found on SEL in terms of why it is important, why we should implement it, and how it can be implemented on a broad scale. There is a gap in the literature, however, regarding a clear rationale for the actual order of operations when it comes to teaching the core competencies of SEL. This gap reaffirms my initial question but makes me wonder why, with such a saturated body of research and SEL becoming a growing educational trend, no one seems to have sought a sequencing rationale before. This makes me wonder if perhaps I am viewing SEL instruction as a definitive linear process as opposed to a multifaceted iterative cycle. Perhaps I am asking the wrong question, and should instead be concerned with whether SEL competencies *should* be set into a sequence, and what the implications are for attempting to make SEL linear and definitive.

## **Part II: Social Emotional Learning and the Edge of Leadership: Where Research meets Practice and I Decide where I Stand**

### **The Edge of Leadership**

Around the office, we often remark that “we don’t even know what EOL is yet.” This is because it is like a living and breathing entity that continues to grow and change before our eyes. It began several years ago as a grant-funded experiment in two fifth-grade classrooms in two separate schools in the local area and has grown into the massive project it is today. Still grant-funded, EOL now reaches four public school’s 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, as well as the district’s entire 7<sup>th</sup> grade population of Keene, New Hampshire. Additionally, we work with high school

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students, and run a summer program that brings together high schoolers from across the northeast for an intensive three-day leadership skill-building program. In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade we run ten 42-minute sessions over the course of two days, anywhere from once per month to bi-weekly. With 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we see classes for an hour and a half once per month. This program structure allows us to build a long-term relationship with our participants and derive a deeper understanding of the needs and abilities of the learning community as a whole.

EOL's mission is to "develop empowering leadership skills that can be used to organize others, set positive examples, effect change and make a difference" (High 5 Adventure Learning Center 2017, n.p.). Three programmatic themes are the cornerstone of EOL: connect, empower, and lead. "Connect" refers to those skills involved in forming and sustaining relationships, managing emotions, and developing empathy, among others. "Empower" refers to learning how to think critically and solve problems, and feeling capable of working with others. Finally, "lead" refers to acting as a role model and being responsible for your community. Each of these themes is evident in all lessons, and each overlaps and interconnects seamlessly throughout. In any given lesson, there is an emphasis on being connected, as well as helping participants be empowered to take on challenges in a safe environment, and opportunities for leading one another and being responsible for the experience of those around them.

### **SEL and Social Change**

EOL's program goal to empower young people acknowledges that the current education system disempowers them in the first place. Helping children discover their potential to lead is a non-neutral pedagogy, and means that educators honor the experiences of young people as valid and important. In my review of the literature I highlighted the connection between SEL and

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experiential learning, but I would be remiss if I did not take that further and headline the deep connection between SEL and social change education. I have learned through my training course work and my experience, influenced by the likes of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and John Dewey, that traditional western education is a tool for upholding systems of oppression. Working within schools has allowed me to witness children being treated as empty receptacles to be filled by “making deposits of information which [the teacher] considers to constitute true knowledge,” as in Freire’s banking system of education (2009, p. 76). I see behavior being “managed” without young people understanding why their behavior was problematic in the first place. It doesn’t take long upon entering a classroom to identify which students have been labeled as “challenging,” not because of their actions, but because of the way they are treated by teachers and para-educators. SEL has the potential to make monumental changes within the traditional education system, but only if it is implemented in a way that challenges the status quo of children as passive recipients of information. Through an engaged pedagogy, SEL can be implemented in a thoughtful, holistic, and customizable way that honors knowledge beyond rote learning. As Arnold and Marshall explain, “for social change educators whose task is to empower people, how we add new information takes on political importance. Our process must affirm what people already know while suggesting new questions and frameworks for deepening understanding.” (1991 p. 56). Furthermore, EOL approaches programming with the belief that our participants have the capacity for mastering SEL competencies, and that we can act guides in their discovery and practice.

That being said, ensuring that our pedagogy is critical and engaged is a trying process when outside influences have the potential to limit EOL’s ability to be customizable. Over the long course of this project my scope of understanding my own research question has shifted as

## Through the Phoroapter: A Reflective Analysis

demands to merge with the Keene curricular map have intensified. Now more than ever there is a pressure to decide what EOL is, and what it will look like in the coming years. As I mentioned, EOL is in a constant state of growth and change, and each day we wrap our minds around the intricacies, challenges, and nuances that are present at every turn. As I approach this inquiry from a trainer lens, I find myself at the intersection of content (SEL competencies) and process (the Experiential Learning Cycle). Where they meet lies my question: can you and should you formally sequence SEL competencies in a pre-set curriculum?

### **What I Think**

After months of research, thought, reflection, and practice, I have come to realize that SEL cannot effectively be sequenced by competency or competency component skills into a concrete curricular plan. In fact, I believe it is bad practice to create a universal SEL curriculum. I believe this for several reasons which I will explore below.

#### *A set SEL curriculum is unresponsive to participant needs*

Adams et al implores the training practitioner to plan for the potential need to shift and change any course design: “the flexibility to make needed design adjustments based on what is happening in the moment is an essential design skill. Many factors can necessitate redesigning a course” (2007, p. 85). As EOL flirts with the prospect of becoming a standard part of the Keene district’s curricular map, we are pressured to organize our programming into literal boxes, following the format and structure for all other curricular components such as physical education, language arts, math, and so forth. Our plans would need to be laid prior to the start of the school year, and prior to any opportunity for us as facilitators to interface with our

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participants. This is problematic because it takes away our ability to assess skill and awareness levels, and plan an appropriate approach to meeting participants where they are ‘at.’ Assessment is crucial in design and facilitation, particularly at the start of a program since this “allows you to tailor the workshop to the needs of particular learners by selecting activities that correspond to their preferences” as well as their needs (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward 1999, p. 21). Today we are accountable to our participants and their needs, using communication with teachers to adapt and change things as we see fit. In a universal curriculum, we would become accountable only to pre-set standards, goals, and objectives. Our measures of success would likely shift from our current evaluations completed by classroom teachers reflecting upon their student’s behavior to the evaluation processes applied to all others pieces of the curriculum, such as rubrics and even grades. This might be the standard for academic classes, but through my trainer lens, it is not the best we can do for our participants. Furthermore, this approach to learning and knowledge is fundamentally at odds with experiential learning’s theory of knowledge. One author writes that knowledge in the context of prescribing a curriculum and standardized testing “implies that the more you can remember the smarter you are. Problem solving is not required in this theory of knowledge [...] Experiential learning requires students to get up out of their chairs and test out their ideas in real-life situations” (Wurdinger 2005, p. 26). A set curriculum threatens to place SEL within an academic framework in which standards and grades supersede the value of authentic skill development and practice, as well as participants’ awareness of self, others, and their collective learning community.

Currently, at the start of the school year we spend time setting the tone for the year, introducing participants to our style of experiential programming which is unusual in the context of traditional western classroom teaching. We also facilitate specific activities designed to assess

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participants' current levels of social awareness. Continuing throughout the year, we are in constant contact with teachers in order to remain abreast of what comes up in the classroom which we might be able to address. For example, when an incident of bullying occurred between visits to one elementary school, we were able to adjust our plan for that specific class to address the incident within the context of our programming and be responsive over the short-term. I believe that a set curriculum would not allow us this space and leeway needed in order to respond to the needs of our classes.

### *A set SEL curriculum is culturally incompetent*

For the same reasons stated above, a set SEL curriculum with a pre-planned sequence of SEL competencies cannot be adapted in real time to suit the cultural differences of participants. This poses major implications for the ethicality of such a curriculum. Cheng et al explains that “barriers for minority groups can greatly affect their ability to engage in traditional adventure programming, which if not modified or integrated with specific cultural practices might limit effectiveness to only Anglo-Saxon individuals” (2016, p. 3). When assumptions are made about participants, any training runs the risk of being ineffective, exclusionary, or triggering. Training designs have the potential to alienate participants from different backgrounds or with different cultural beliefs and experiences. As Chang comments, “experiences, including those gained through adventure programming, often occur through the lenses of ones' own cultural beliefs. As a result, adventure programming created within a specific cultural context may yield different outcomes than originally intended when applied with participants from differing cultural backgrounds” (p.2). I believe that when we lose our ability to adapt a curriculum, we also lose our ability to strive for cultural competence. Lessons related to SEL are no exception.

## Through the Phoropter: A Reflective Analysis

This dilemma reminds me of discussions during TOT in which we considered our approach to social justice education. Could you be a culturally competent trainer without taking the necessary steps to learn about and assess your participants? Adams et al (2007) argue that greater efficacy comes from knowing ourselves and our participants, particularly their social identities, prior experiences, and initial understanding of the subject matter when it comes to social justice education. I don't believe this differs when it comes to SEL. In fact, the nature of our programming has the potential to bring out a great number of factors that could impact participants vastly differently depending upon their backgrounds and experiences. Therefore SEL instruction must be culturally responsive.

In TDEL we read of Hofstede's key dimensions of culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity (Rothwell 2008). Each of these dimension is present in adventure education, and has the tendency to be approached from a western lens throughout our programming. For example, much of SEL involves individualistic thinking, particularly the competencies focused on self-management and self-awareness. While western culture is predominately individualistic, some participants might come from collectivist cultures where it is challenging to use "I" statements. Chang et al explains that this tendency could be "due to the [collectivist] expectations to be receptive of others' opinions and more restrained with one's own needs or desires. Hence participants in collectivist cultures may have tendencies to look for acceptable behavior and possibly even the right answer in order to either please authority figures and/or maintain harmony within the group" (2016, p. 7). In this example, without adjusting program delivery to address this differing culture dimension, it is not necessarily damaging, but potentially ineffective because your programming might not impact participants on the level at

## Through the Phoropter: A Reflective Analysis

which you are aiming. As Rothwell states “educators and trainers should not assume that everyone learns the same way in all cultures” (2008, p. 82).

Regardless of a district’s cultural landscape, education programs should be prepared to and have the space to strive for cultural competence in design and delivery in order to be as accessible and effective as possible. Perhaps complete cultural accessibility is impossible, but there should not be barriers to striving for cultural competence imbedded in the very structure of a program. Furthermore, I believe that the work I am a part of should practice and model what it teaches. When some of the competencies we explore include things like appreciating diversity and perspective-taking, I want to ensure that my work is able to do just that. For me as a trainer, I see the negative potential for a universal curriculum model to become an area of conscious incompetence that is beyond my control to address. In other words, it becomes something I *know* is irresponsible, but I do not feel like I can do anything about it.

### *A set SEL curriculum is replicable*

Replication in and of itself is not inherently problematic. However, since SEL is most effectively taught experientially, I believe that SEL program facilitators should have an adequate understanding of experiential learning and its use in the classroom and learning environments in general. As Wurdinger succinctly reminds us, “an important lesson from the past [...] is to understand the theory behind experiential learning before attempting to implement it in the classroom” (2005, p. 15). Instituting a universal SEL curriculum implies that it can be replicated, and leaves open the possibility that anyone could facilitate it. It opposes my trainer ethics to accept that individuals lacking in knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards SEL and experiential learning should facilitate an experiential learning program, particularly when lessons often



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require risk-taking and vulnerability. I believe this has the potential to be dangerous for participants. In my first reflective practice question, I explored the premise of trauma-informed practice, and reflected on my inability to address a particular situation as a CONTACT Program Assistant. I walked away from that situation learning the hard way that without the necessary skills to be effective, I could potentially cause more harm than good. By the same token, opening the doors for anyone to facilitate the ELC without proper training, including an understanding of the ELC, means there is a potential for harm. SEL programming isn't always fun and games. At times emotions run high as participants are pushed beyond their comfort zones and into their 'panic zones', both in the classroom and on the challenge course.

Not every practitioner shares this same belief. I recently attended a one-day workshop based off a book titled *Social and Emotional Learning in Action: Experiential Activities to Positively Impact School Climate*. The book is a collection of activities organized into SEL competencies intended for teachers and school staff to be able to pick up and facilitate activities and debriefs. During the workshop, the ELC was explained for only a few moments, as well as SEL competencies. The rest of the time was spent allowing four participants the opportunity to demonstrate how easily the book can be used by opening to a lesson and facilitating it for the rest of the group. The four volunteers were given 20 minutes to read and prepare for the lesson, and all necessary props were at hand.

Being a participant in activities I have facilitated myself multiple times was a very interesting experience. Through my trainer lens I was incredibly attuned to the facilitators' methods. What jumped out to me the most was that without an adequate understanding of experiential learning, the facilitators were not honoring the process of the ELC, nor allowing participants to discover their own answers to the problems put forth. Additionally, there was

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barely time dedicated to processing the activity and drawing the relevant learning from it. In my opinion, this removed all intentionality from the activities and rendered them into mere games for the sake of playing. While this example does not necessarily mean that participants could be at risk of harm due to a facilitator's lack of skills, there are other examples in which trainings in the hands of an inexperienced facilitator could cause more harm than good. I believe it could also become dangerous for an individual without the specific skills in SEL and knowledge of experiential learning theory to facilitate a program that pushes participants to their learning edges, asks them to be vulnerable, to take risks, and seeks to bring about behavioral changes. My takeaway from the experience was that key elements to SEL delivery are *knowledge* of SEL competencies and the ELC, an *attitude* that SEL is important for young people to develop in schools, and the *skills* to effectively facilitate experiential learning and adventure. A six-hour workshop and a book in hand does not an SEL facilitator make.

Furthermore, I don't believe you can facilitate any one competency in isolation, as this particular curriculum implies. Each lesson resided under a banner such as "trust" and "problem solving." The book was designed to be followed throughout the year page by page -- *or* for any one lesson to happen at any given time in no particular order. In my opinion, the scope of each lesson was so narrow that competencies were treated like entirely separate entities, instead of the overlapping and intersecting themes I've come to know them as.

### **What Does Work?**

The more I explore SEL through this inquiry, the more I gravitate towards EOL's model of program design. Not only does our current structure allow us to be responsive (culturally and otherwise), our design model is grounded in theoretical frameworks that I believe to be best

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practices for SEL instruction. The first is adventure learning, following the premise that learning happens when participants are challenged experientially and supported in seeking a positive outcome. The second is Kurt Lewin's unfreezing/changing/refreezing and David Jenkin's Disequilibrium which explains our process for bringing about behavior and awareness changes in our participants. Finally, an awareness continuum, devised by my EOL colleagues prior to my hiring, helps me theorize EOL's sequence rationale as it applies to SEL competencies. These theoretical foundations are explored below.

### **Adventure Education**

EOL uses adventure education to invoke change and positive growth within participants. Adventure, or facing unknown outcomes, forces participants to adapt, change, and grow. When faced in a safe environment, adventure and challenge offer participants an opportunity to stretch beyond what they ever thought they were capable of. Adventure should be supported, stimulating, satisfying, and significant, according to Project Adventure's Mary Henton (1996).

At two points during the school year with EOL, adventure and challenge are explored through the use of a challenge course, which is an extensive high ropes system that, when operated correctly and with appropriate framing and facilitation, allows participants to explore a side of themselves they might not have previously known. For many, hearing the word "adventure" probably brings up images of backcountry trekking or bouldering the side of a rock face, and certainly climbing on a challenge course. The approach of bringing adventure to the classroom, on the other hand, "asks teachers to examine the *qualities* of adventure rather than the *appearance* of adventure" (Henton 1996, p. 8). For the remainder of the year, EOL utilizes

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adventure and challenge in the classroom by presenting problem-solving opportunities for students which involve risk-taking and stretching comfort zones.

Embedded in adventure learning pedagogy is processing and reflection, two elements as important (and sometimes more important) than an initiative or activity itself. At EOL our pedagogy is conversations over activities because it is through reflection and dialogue that participants begin to generalize their experiences beyond whatever activity they have done. Another cornerstone of adventure is “challenge by choice,” an often-used phrase that reminds participants that they have direct control over what amount of adventure and uncertainty they feel comfortable taking on. Creating group norms that are continually revisited is also an essential element of adventure because it ensures that the space is as supportive and conducive to learning and growth. Often referred to as a Full Value Contract in the adventure field, and as Us/Not Us at High 5, norms are a way of ensuring that participants “respect the integrity diversity, and strengths of the individuals at the same time that they respect and support the group as a whole” (Henton 1996, p. 68). Given these mainstays of adventure-based learning, an adventure framework is a best practice for SEL instruction because it intrinsically motivates both the individual and the group to participate in their own competency development.

### **Lewin, Jenkins & EOL**

EOL applies Kurt Lewin’s approach to bringing about planned opportunities for change, as well as David Jenkins’ notions on disequilibrium. Through a structured challenge, whether it be climbing a high-ropes element or solving a group initiative, participants learn that their approach to solving a problem is inadequate and must therefore change. Because we work with groups at a time with a goal of bringing about positive growth as a whole unit, we also help participants realize the impact they have on those around them. We use this as an opportunity for

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participants to unfreeze, or show that there is a pressing need to change. These experiences often lead to frustration, tension and storming. This is a necessary step, according to Jenkins and Lewin, for whom deviating from a comfortable equilibrium creates a motivational pull to change (Golembiewski 1982, p. 55). Goleman agrees with this notion, asserting that “mastery in the emotional domain is especially difficult because skills need to be acquired when people are usually least able to take in new information and learn new habits of response—when they are upset” (1995, p. 266). Each lesson follows up the experience with a reflection and debrief in order for participants to process their experiences and their need to move or change. Finally, through practice and positive reinforcement by teachers even after we have left the classroom, participants have the opportunity to refreeze their newly learned behavior. This change hopefully happens on both individual and group levels.

When we create the conditions for disequilibrium, we do so in safe measure so that participants are not pushed beyond their learning edges. Disequilibrium, in the case of EOL, means creating a challenge beyond the normal scope of classroom challenge, which creates some form of internal conflict within participants. As Adams et al explains, “in a supportive learning environment, disequilibrium can also be exhilarating as participants grapple with contradictions and seek more satisfactory ways to make sense of social reality (2007, p. 72). Integral in this process is a sense of safety, but not one of comfort. As bell hooks reminds us, conflict should not be a scary thing for the facilitator: “instead of focusing on the commonly held assumption that we are safe when everyone agrees, when everyone has an equal time to speak, if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up to the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict” (2000, p. 87). Although hooks refers to conflict within the post-secondary classroom, the same rings true for

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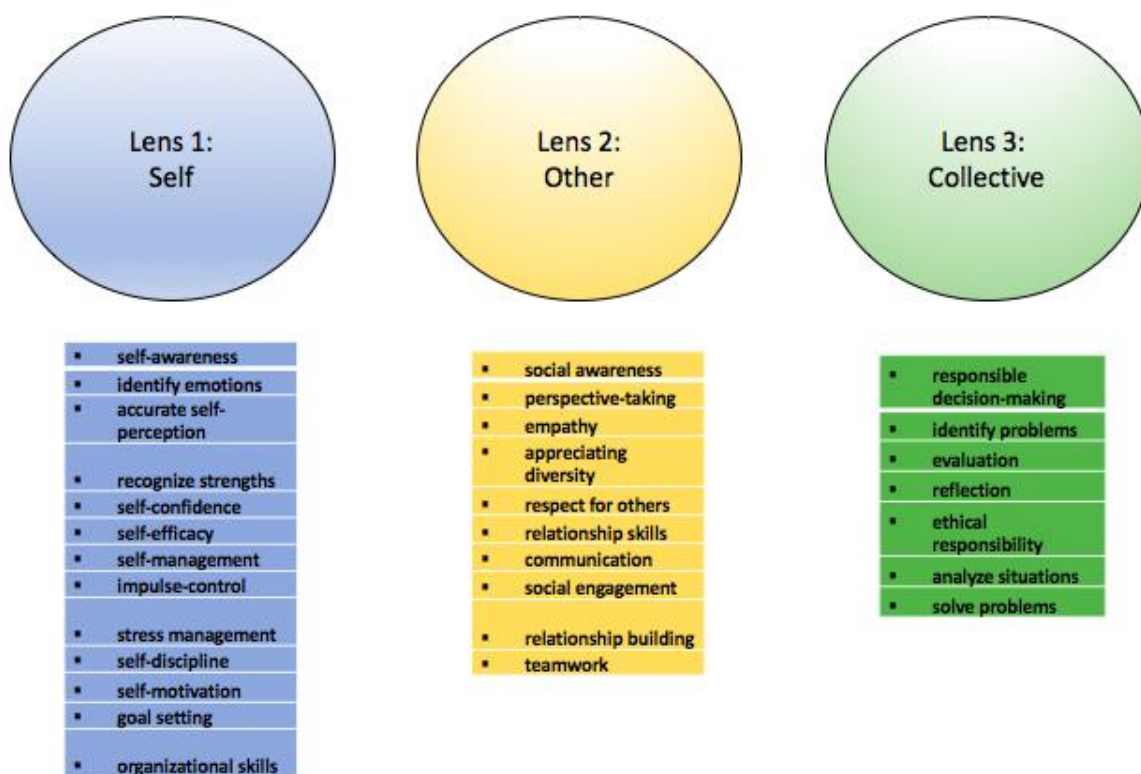
introducing grade-school students to instances of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. We want to bring participants to their learning edge in order that they may begin to seek a change within themselves, and indeed tap into their potential to stretch and grow, and that might feel like an internal conflict where preconceived notions are called into question. As hooks writes, “when we teach our students that there is safety in learning to cope with conflict, with differences of thought and opinion, we prepare their minds for radical openness” (p. 88). Honoring the change process is a best practice for SEL instruction because it grounds the program design and the facilitator in the intention of eliciting behavioral change while maintaining a balance of risk and safety.

### **The Awareness Continuum: Our Approach to SEL Sequencing**

At EOL we follow a guiding framework of self, other, and collective. Each is a category of awareness, and through our programming we seek to develop our participants’ skills in each both independently and in relation to one another. We refer to this framework as the awareness continuum, and although it is not explicitly stated as our sequence rationale, I believe it is an accurate summary of how we approach sequencing within our programming. Although it was devised as a continuum, I prefer to look at self, other, and collective awareness as lenses through which we shape our programming on a lesson and year-long basis. As such, I imagine three lenses, with each representing self, others, and collective awareness respectively. If you have ever had an eye exam at the ophthalmologist’s, you’ve likely looked through a phoropter which layers lenses on top of one another to determine the precise amount of correction your eyes require in order to see 20/20. To understand how self, other, and collective awareness guides our program sequencing, I imagine the phoropter first laying the “self” lens, which includes all skills

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related to self-awareness and self-management, as depicted in Table 1. Through this lens, we design those lessons that are generally situated at the start of the year. Next, the phoroptyer lays the second lens, the “others” lens, on top of the first lens. This lens adds those skills related to social-awareness and relationship skills. Now we view and shape our lessons through both lenses which allows us to approach awareness of others while honoring the fact that we cannot move to awareness of others until we have an awareness of ourselves. Finally, the phoroptyer lays the third and final “collective” lens, and we begin to design lessons accounting for all three levels of awareness and how together they work to improve the learning community. The awareness lenses are greater than the sum of their parts. Figure 2 depicts each lens as well as the skills each represents.



These awareness lenses are neither limiting nor rigid and do not compromise our ability to be responsive to our participants and to meet them where they are at. Through this guiding

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framework we can focus on each of the SEL competencies individually without compromising their interconnectivity. This phoroapter metaphor is a way of understanding how we create a fluid sequence of lessons throughout the school year with each new lesson building upon the previous. Pareek & Lynton (2000) support this method, explaining that a “continuity of subject matter reinforces learning and ensures better than the stop-start-stop type of syllabus that a meaningful and memorable chunk of a subject will have been learned by the time a block is completed” (p. 225). The authors also remind the facilitator to prioritize “[practicing] components of ascending degrees of complexity.” (p. 225). In my experience and opinion, this premise of self, other, and collective, combined with a dedication to experiential and adventure learning and all that each entail, as well as a pedagogy that honors the change process represents the best practice for creating a SEL program with a sequence that makes sense, is responsive to participants, and lives up to ethical training standards.

### **Part III: Reflection & Growth**

Taking a stance to answer my capstone inquiry has been an extremely trying process but has also revealed a great deal about my growth as a trainer, facilitator, and ultimately as a student of social justice education. Several external factors made this such a challenge, including the fact that the EOL program is still in a state of growth and development, and the fact that midway through authoring this capstone, talk of funding and sustainability have propelled us into a discussion of replication and finding a permanent home for our program within the Keene district’s curriculum map. These external factors in conjunction with several personal challenges have ultimately opened up the learning process, called attention to my own biases and areas for



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growth, and taught me tremendously about my training competencies, where I have made considerable growth, and where I still have some ways to go.

### *The unknown makes me uncomfortable*

One key learning is that I am uncomfortable with great unknowns within the work I do. This is somewhat ironic, as I work each day with a program that uses unknowns in order to help participants stretch, change and grow. As it turns out, I am uncomfortable operating without feeling grounded in a particular theory. I have found, as time goes on, that I am unwilling to trust my experiences in favor of trusting the theories of others; I am comfortable justifying my experiences through relevant theory, but I am uncomfortable allowing my experience alone to translate into any personal value system. This has been a roadblock for me in the past. I think back to my on-campus phase and the consistent struggle I worked through in Training of Trainers where I was challenged weekly to reflect on literature and my own experiences in order to take a stance on a *question to ponder*—as I was reflecting on these weekly questions, I found myself seeking comfort in literature and theory, while minimizing and invalidating my own experiences. Perhaps I am a product of the banking system of education, as described by Freire (2009), because I invalidate my experiences in favour of institutionalized thought and theory. I believe this is what has stopped me from deciding what I think on a variety of topics. In this inquiry, I struggled to make a declarative statement regarding my take on SEL sequencing because I had only experience upon which to base my claim. This was uncomfortable but necessary for my growth as a training designer. Moving forward, I need to increase my trainer self-confidence and honor that which emerges through my work and recognize it as a legitimate praxis. Freire would agree that honouring what I know as valid is a step in my own

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humanization, and necessary to the process of becoming a social justice educator. Furthermore, believing in my experience as knowledge is itself a practice of critical liberatory education. As Freire explains, “education as the practice of freedom [...] denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (2009, p. 81). Applying this lesson moving forward in my practice will improve my ability to be flexible, take risks in my work, and bring greater congruence between my beliefs and actions. My work is an adventure, and just like any other adventure, the outcomes are unknown, and that is a premise I can manage better by trusting the process, and trusting myself.

From a training standpoint, this is a crucial growth point for me. While this learning arose in relation to my grasp of theory and design rationale, it is extremely relevant to my future in training and facilitation. While I feel somewhat more comfortable confronting potential unknowns in facilitating with EOL, there is great value in being prepared for and anticipating the unknown, and learning to be comfortable with its potential to arise. In facilitation situations, it’s crucial to understand that even participants might not know what they are bringing to the training space. There is only so much that one can perceive, let alone prepare for. Participants might not know their threshold until they stand on the precipice of their learning edge and realize they are triggered, or do not possess the skills to process their experiences. While there is no single way to always be prepared for what might come up, being prepared for the unknown, and honoring the potential that exists within it, invites participants to engage in ways that they need to—whether consciously or subconsciously. Moving forward, this can be mitigated by taking more deliberate steps to know our participants, and gives all the more reason to ensure that a workshop is designed with space to change accordingly.

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*I like to put things into boxes, and that isn't always okay*

A major lightbulb moment for me during this capstone process was realizing that setting a sequence for SEL instruction makes an assumption that all participants are at the same level, have similar needs, and will benefit from the same specific sequence. Once I realized I was seeking a one-size-fits-all approach to SEL, I realized just how much I seek logical and linear frameworks in order to make sense of the world. Not unlike my feeling of discomfort with unknowns, seeking logic models can be extremely limiting.

This realization has changed my understanding of my own learning style. According to the learning style indicator we took during TDEL, within Kolb's learning style framework I am a Dynamic Learner. In the Trainer Self-Assessment document that accompanied my personal assessment inventory, I wrote that my dynamic learning style meant I had "a propensity to dive into hands-on experience and [a] slight aversion to theoretical models and logic formats" (Globus-Hoenich 2014). Today, I recognize that I strongly favor elements of analytic learning, including theoretical models and logic formats. According to McCarthy as quoted by Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward (1999), Analytic Learners "devise theories by integrating their observations into what they know. They learn by thinking through ideas" (p. 24), and place high value on expert knowledge and data. Dynamic Learners, on the other hand, prefer a learning environment that "builds a bridge from learning to application and points towards actively using new learning" (p.24). Making the leap from thought to action is where things become challenging for me, as I continue spending too much time entertaining different possibilities rather than landing on my own belief and value system. I become locked into an analytical standstill that does not serve me in training design nor facilitation.

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Adams et al (2007) reminds trainers to call attention to our own learning styles and how they limit our instructional designs (p.405). The authors also dedicate an entire chapter to knowing ourselves as social justice educators, emphasizing that constantly working towards self-knowledge and self-awareness are crucial for teachers and students alike. As I strive to grow as a social justice educator, it is paramount that I learn to land on what I think before I ask others to do the same. Of course, this will be a constant iterative process. Furthermore, so much about social justice is intersectional and cannot be put neatly into boxes. If it is put into boxes and is not intersectional, it isn't social justice after all.

*My approach to bringing SEL to schools is idealistic, and that's okay*

My underlying assumption about traditional western education is that it does not reach nor benefit everyone. I do not see it as honoring students' experiences, beliefs, and identities, nor accessing their learning needs. Traditional western education suppresses critical thinking in young people in favor of teaching obedience, as bell hooks (2010) explains in her discussion of engaged pedagogy. Over the course of my on-campus and practicum work, I have come to see SEL as the missing piece in the current educational puzzle. As a self-identified realist, SEL is one area in which I am proudly idealistic. Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us that education cannot be neutral, and I am not neutral: "if we are not able to find and enter the open spaces in closed systems...we doom ourselves by reinforcing the belief that these educational systems cannot be changed" (hooks 2003, p. 74). I believe that SEL could and should bring about a much-needed cultural shift in education. With proper implementation that garners buy-in and collaboration across districts and communities, SEL could lead to incredible and liberating transformation: "in essence, this is the process of framing how a community knows and understands its role in the development of children and adolescents" (Benson 2007, p. 49).

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I believe that equal time should be spent discerning how best to implement any SEL program so that it is deeply integrated within the fabric of school, district, and community. This notion has been supported by researchers who find that “it mattered just as much how a program was implemented as the quality of the program” (Kress & Elias 2006, p. 595). The same authors succinctly state that which I hold to be true: “a comprehensively implemented approach to SEL transcends work by individual teachers in individual classes” (p. 596). Effective and *responsible* SEL implementation deserves its own capstone, as there is much to explore regarding teacher training, making SEL something parents will support, and finding every possible means of integrating authentic skill acquisition into schools without turning to grades and standardizations.

Although I came to the field of SEL and facilitation relatively recently, it has not taken me long to adopt it as a prominent factor in my personal pedagogy. This capstone journey has only made me more idealistic about the possibility of SEL becoming a norm in western education. As a social change educator I think it is crucial that I believe whole-heartedly in that which I am teaching, so I remain proudly idealistic.

### **Moving Forward**

Deciding that I am ethically opposed to making SEL delivery fixed and universal has been challenging but also incredibly impactful. A question that remains for me now is what I will do if that is the direction in which my organization chooses to move. Having sustainable program funding is a very real challenge for non-profits, and the prospect of landing long-term status within the Keene school district is understandably tempting. But how will I grapple with my trainer ethics when it comes to guaranteeing an income? Can I be so idealistic as to say that I will step away from this opportunity to learn and grow as a facilitator and program designer because

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the quality of our program is compromised? This brings one of our many TOT “questions to ponder” to light. I think moving forward I need to continually discern whether our work is causing more harm than good for our participants for the reasons I outlined in Part II. If the answer is yes, perhaps there are ways to work within the system itself to reimagine a curricular structure that satisfies the district as well as our standards for program quality and efficacy. I would be shocked and disappointed if EOL and High 5 settled for anything less, so hopefully this will not be an ethical dilemma I someday face.

A topic for future consideration that arose for me during this inquiry is examining outdoor adventure education through a social justice lens. The more I spend time in the adventure field, the more I notice it is a very white, male-dominated place, with extensive limitations when it comes to inclusion. Without a doubt the field has a long way to go, but I wonder about the activities I engage in facilitating on an almost daily basis which might operate under this same paradigm. Perhaps a future step for me is exploring social identity and outdoor adventure.

### **Conclusion**

Through this project I have formed an educated opinion regarding a salient topic. SEL awareness is growing nationwide, and this inquiry has helped me become more informed about what is out there, what is not, and how to potentially reconcile the two. It has also helped me recognize blind spots and areas of growth, which are invaluable to my continued exploration and learning as a student of training and facilitation. As I conclude this capstone project I am struck by just how much of my course work at SIT played out throughout my reflective practice. It seems I have been walking my own experiential learning journey ever since August of 2014 without realizing just how much I was generalizing and applying that which I learned while on campus. Completing this phase of my learning represents beginning the next iteration of my journey through experience-based learning. I can only hope that I remain grounded in an intention of forever refining my skills in reflective practice.

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