



THE NOVA SCOTIA SEA SCHOOL

# **The Container Principle The Wisdom of No Escape**

**Professional Enrichment Training Course**

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**The Container Principle;  
Resilience, Chaos and Trust**

By Crane W. Stookey, Founder, The Nova Scotia Sea School

People often react to difficulty by acting in fragile ways, but it is possible to be resilient. People often feel trapped by chaos around them, but it is possible for chaos to inspire insight. People often feel that the way to help others is to show them a better way to be, but it is possible to trust people's basic nature and support them in being who they are.

These are the themes of the approach to experiential education developed over the past ten years at the Nova Scotia Sea School. The goal of the Sea School's programming is to help people discover their resilience; how to be emotionally, physically and intellectually like a rubber ball, rather than like a glass doll or an iron bar. The technique relies on skillful use of chaos, and the underlying attitude on which the program is based is trust in the inherent wisdom of everyone.

For the context of this, a bit of background: the Nova Scotia Sea School is a program for teenagers based in Halifax and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. In the winter, local students build wooden boats, starting from trees. Since our founding in 1994 we have built 12 boats from 8 to 30 feet in length. In summer students from all over North America and beyond participate in coastal sail training expeditions lasting from 5 to 21 days, in boats that students have built.

However, it's important to emphasize that the Sea School is not trying to train either boatbuilders or sailors. That is simply technique. The real point, as our mission statement says, is to take advantage of the Maritime tradition of boats and the sea as a means for young people to learn the values that seafaring has taught for generations: leadership, courage, responsibility, cooperation, generosity and respect.

As for the themes in the title, first we'll look at goal of resilience, then look at how to make chaos a path to that goal and how trust in the participants, rather than in our position as educators, can open the path for those who want to walk it.

In terms of resilience, students often find, particularly at the beginning, that they are easily defeated by small difficulties. If they stub their finger, if they have to row in a calm, if they have a wet night, if their plank doesn't fit, they are inclined to shatter, to say "This sucks, I'm not doing it." But if you want your boat to float, or if you want to get it safely to harbour, that approach doesn't work so well. And of course the same is true of having a hard time with school, a hard time with parents, a hard time with friends or lovers, a hard time with oneself. As Kate Walker, one of the Sea School's young instructors, said to students having difficulty on a trip, if you hit a roadblock, you don't blow up your car. You look for detours.

But the alternative to feeling like glass is not necessarily feeling tough and indestructible, like an iron bar. That is really no more resilient than glass. It may not fall apart as easily, but the attitude of "overcoming the challenge" or "conquering our fears" fosters rigidity, aggression and a limited view of the possibilities of a situation. A rubber ball, on the other hand, is not stopped by the wall, nor does it try to bash its way through it. It rebounds from the wall without losing its energy. It uses obstacles to change direction, to reveal new possibilities.

This approach applies also to the values of the Sea School's mission statement, because these values are meant to be taken collectively. It is as important to cooperate as it is to lead, and in fact practicing one shows how to practice the other. It is as important to be respectful as it is to be courageous, and the self-reliance of responsibility must be balanced by the self-effacement of generosity. All of this requires a flexible approach.

How is chaos the key to discovering this flexibility and resilience? This is where we start to talk about technique. As Winston Churchill said of war, "Out of intense complexities, intense simplicities arise.", and this is an aspect of technique that is well known to experiential educators. From Outward Bound's "the moral equivalent of war" to learning hundreds of ropes in a Tall Ship sail-training program, "keep it simple, stupid" is only part of the program design story.

There is a very potent discussion of the use of chaos in a new translation of Sun Tzu: The Art of War, by the Denma Translation Group. To elucidate the poetic but cryptic ancient Chinese text the translation group wrote several essays, including one entitled "The Sage Commander". The culture of experiential

education is usually more holistic than militaristic, but for someone in command of the design and delivery of a program, whose goal is that participants learn to take command of their lives, the military model is in fact a very useful one. Knowing how to be a sage commander, how to access both our wisdom and our power to act, is key for both educators and participants and, from the point of view of the Sun Tzu, requires a good understanding of the choices between glass, iron and rubber. So it seems appropriate to quote here at length the discussion of chaos from this essay.

The ground of battle, and indeed of all life, is unpredictable, full of chaos and uncertainty.

Although chaos is generally a difficult and uncomfortable time, it is also dynamic, a time of great openness and creativity. The sage commander develops an appreciation for its potent quality. Since he holds no fixed position, chaos is not a threat. He is not undermined by uncertainty. Rather than giving in to the impulse to control chaos when it arises, the sage commander rests in the chaos and allows it to resolve itself.

This trust resembles conventional patience, in that the sage commander refrains from action. Yet rather than an act of forbearance, it is a matter of letting things happen in their own time. It is withdrawing from the smaller skirmishes to allow a greater victory to ripen.

When it has rained upstream, the stream's flow intensifies.  
Stop fording. Wait for it to calm. [Chapter 9]

Chaos then becomes a powerful time for the sage commander to take effective action. He can use it as an ally, particularly against a highly solidified position. Chaos can undermine that situation, unraveling it rather than forcing a confrontation. Trying to overpower solidity by building up greater solidity merely triggers the cycle of escalation.

Since the sage commander appreciates and accommodates chaos, he sees more clearly what is taking place within it. Thus he knows how (the potential of the situation) will develop and can catch the moment when one small gesture will be more decisive than a tremendous effort applied at the wrong time or place.

Being prepared and awaiting the unprepared is victory. [Chapter 3]

Allowing a chaotic situation to develop demands courage, for it often means that in the short term things will get worse rather than better. There is always the chance that something of value will be harmed. But in the

interplay of chaos and order, things don't always resolve themselves in a linear manner, so they must be allowed to run their course. Achieving a fundamental, long-term solution is more important than resolving immediate irritation and discomfort. So he allows the situation to develop and with patience finds the right moment to make the critical impact. <sup>(1)</sup>

How to work with chaos in the context of experiential education, how to harness the power of complexity in a simple way, is the technique developed at the Sea School over the last ten years into a basic principle called “The Container Principle: the wisdom of no escape”. To be programmatically effective, chaos needs to be properly contained. But within that container, chaos needs to be allowed to thrive.

The container in this case is any closed, inescapable environment. It can be 12 people in a 28' open boat for 3 weeks at the Sea School, or it can be the river, the glacier, the ropes course, even a room somewhere. The image that best describes this principle is the stone polisher, the can that turns and tumbles the rocks we found at the beach until they turn into gems. The rocks don't get out until they're done, the friction between them, the chaos of their movement, is what polishes them, and in the end the process reveals their natural inherent brilliance. We don't paint colours on them, we trust what's there.

In the same way, the container, from the program design point of view, is the “keep it simple” part: the boat, the river, the focus of the program. Within this container are offered whatever complexities the situation can produce, be they inter-personal, environmental, skills-based, schedule-based and so on. Learning new skills, facing new obstacles, living with new people, encountering new environments; such complexities provide the chaos and the friction that wear out preconceptions, challenge limits, invite inner strength, reveal natural brilliance. Properly contained, complexity reduces things to what matters most.

Creating this sort of container requires great professional skill, but the instructor's job in all this is to provide and manipulate the container, not to manipulate how the participants experience it. The approach is based on trusting the wisdom of everyone and encouraging everyone to come to their own conclusions about their experience. It is not helpful to lead discussions to a foregone conclusion, or insist on any particular emotional outcome, or imagine that the instructor is actually “teaching” people anything about themselves. We don't try to paint the rocks. We allow the chaos to resolve itself. All the programmatic work goes into creating a situation with as much potential as possible for this to happen.

So we as instructors pay very close attention to it all, to the qualities of the container and how they influence the potential of the chaos within it. How are

the complexities working? Are there enough sharp edges for people to chafe against, or does it have too many? Is it like a mirror, reflecting back to people an accurate image of their attitudes and reactions, or is that mirror too blurry, too rosy, or too judgmental? Is there a sense of celebration? A sense of ritual? If any of these qualities are missing or out of balance, how can we adjust? But we work on the container, so that within it people have what they need to work on themselves.

"Since the sage commander appreciates and accommodates chaos, he sees more clearly what is taking place within it. Thus he knows how (the potential of the situation) will develop and can catch the moment when one small gesture will be more decisive than a tremendous effort applied at the wrong time or place."

This approach has proven very successful at the Sea School, and has provoked an interesting debate among alternative educators in other settings. The transferability of these techniques to a variety of situations, ranging from wilderness to program center to classroom, offers a broad field of discussion and opportunity. However experience so far seems to show that the three basic ingredients of containment, friction, and trust in the natural outcome are a universally applicable way to enhance the ordinary chaos of our lives so that it becomes a powerful ally on the path to resilience.

Some alternative educators find the idea of friction and chaos as basic ingredients a bit harsh, but part of this approach to working with others is the idea that compassion is not just about making nice. It's about leaning into the sharp edges of things, with an open heart. Everyone has their own heart. Our job is to help them find some appropriate edges.

1. The Art of War; A New Translation, The Denma Translation Group, Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, 2001, pp. 90-92

## The Heron

Excerpted from "The Burden and Privilege of Educating for Environmental Awareness", by Kelly Cain, *The Journal of Experiential Education*, Volume 22, No. 3, December 1999.

Experiencing nature is much more than spending time in a natural setting. There certainly are times that all of us go to a natural area, but carry the problems of everyday life with us. We walk through the woods or along the shore, but our minds are back at work or at home. The surroundings are no more than a pretty place to worry or plan or reflect on something other than nature. Experiential education takes this preoccupation with everyday problems to such an extreme that it intentionally brings this mental baggage along, using natural areas not as a place to experience nature, but as a unique setting from which to work on self-esteem, team-building, even ways to enhance corporate profitability. The paradox is that we might learn more about ourselves by truly experiencing nature than by simply using nature as a backdrop for our therapeutic or corporate programming. The purpose of this article is to suggest that a wonderful way to experience nature is with an open and empty mind. This is experience with no predetermined purpose, no mental distractions, no expectations. Alan Watts (1958), in *Nature, Man and Woman*, describes this frame of mind as a heron hunting in a marsh:

A heron stands stock-still at the edge of a pool, gazing into the water. It does not seem to be looking for fish, and yet the moment a fish moves it dives. [The way to see nature] is, then, simply to observe silently, openly, and without seeking any particular result. It signifies a mode of observation in which there is no duality of seer and seen; there is simply the seeing.

So what can be done to help the cluttered mind meet nature with an open, free, and empty attitude? I know of two things that will help. First of all, a person must mentally leave the normal daily concerns and thoughts back at the trailhead. Too often people get their bodies into a natural area, but leave their minds somewhere else. For me, it takes a night or two in my backpacking tent before I sleep well. I realize that part of the problem is re-acclimation to mummy bags and hard ground, but a bigger reason is the time it takes for the worries of work and home to peel away.

Secondly, meeting nature with an open and untrammelled mind requires that a person not clear out the mental closet only to fill it up with something else –

even something as productive as outdoor living skills, therapeutic counseling, group dynamics training, or biological/geological/historical information.

This second claim, I realize, runs contrary to experiential education methodology. Teaching outdoor living skills, conducting therapy sessions, facilitating team-building initiatives, and teaching natural and cultural history are what experiential educators do. To lead these activities is the basic reason that experiential educators take groups into natural areas in the first place. Still, this does not negate the fact that these planned activities are impediments to spontaneously encountering nature with an open mind. It is analogous to the student on an organized nature hike who is reprimanded for cloud gazing when the topic of the day is pond study.

Experiential education has long looked at nature as a classroom. This image is useful, but it receives more credence than it deserves. Experiential educators sometimes pat themselves on the back for getting students into natural areas, but getting them there just to use nature as a backdrop is not enough. Nature is much more than a classroom. It is also the teacher.

Obviously, experiential education is not going to, nor should it, abandon many of its reasons for being. However, it needs to acknowledge that most programs do not come near to using nature to its full educational potential. Students, in addition to the normal experiential education fare they receive, ought to learn to encounter nature with an open mind. It is not an exaggeration to say that to do anything less can mean that the most important lessons may go unlearned.



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**PROVOCATIONS**  
(Ideas for instructors)

The instructor's job is to create an environment, a container. It is not to create experiences. We can manipulate the environment, but we must be cautious about manipulating our students' experience.

In doing this job, here are a few points to consider. These are relevant equally to activities, to discussions and to "time out".

**If you have to say what you mean, that is the lowest form of teaching.**

The most skillful way to present things is by example, by pointing but not necessarily naming. The most powerful way to point is, again, to let the environment do it. We teach by working with container and decorum, not by telling people what to think.

Allow students space to have their own experience. Space, not vacuum.

Instructors can direct students' attention to key ideas, but the students will each see in their own way. And, most important, they will be pointing things out to each other, and to us. Our job is to foster the discovery of ideas, not to insist that they see what we see.

**We're not out here to make nice.**

We're here to experience whatever happens. The sea is a harsh, unforgiving environment. For students, part of the potential for growth comes from recognizing that things are not okay. We are not in control, we don't necessarily get along, we are not comfortable, we have no place to hide. Still, we can proceed on that basis. The more we are willing to touch the sharp edges of it all, the more we learn about ourselves.

Allow situations to have their natural consequences, and do not shield students from these consequences. This can have a subtle level as well. One's state of mind is also a consequence of something.

Safety is first. Safe means uninjured, un-harassed, non-hypothermic, and hydrated, and students need to know that on that level we will keep them safe. Safe does not necessarily mean warm and dry, well-rested or enthusiastic.

When students experience a loss of heart, that's an opportunity for understanding. As instructors, we can help them to discover their own understanding, rather than try to fix their situation. This help consists of allowing the harshness of the situation to be there, while offering an example of gentleness, cheerfulness and affection.

**“Out of intense complexities, intense simplicities arise.”** (Winston Churchill)

### **Have more curiosity than agenda.**

This is about understanding our own motivation. If we insist on a particular result, to satisfy our own ideas, we will get no genuine response.

### **Enjoy the Dance.**

When to step forward and when to step back.

Touch and go.

Understand the play between the apparent goal and the true goal.

Remember the basic principles even at the most detailed level.

### **Trust the students. Let them speak for themselves.**

Skulkers can be challenged, but the person who genuinely thinks this is baloney contributes as much to the potential of the group experience as anyone. We can foster trust in the wisdom of everyone, which will incite greater understanding than our saying something is so.

This also means that we don't have to package things too neatly. Students usually understand more than we think, on levels we don't even suspect. We don't have to cross the t's and dot the i's of their understanding for them.

### **The best technique is humour.**

#### **Be Yourself**

"The sage commander starts with himself. Thus his first question is not what to do but how to be. Simply being oneself brings about a power that is often lost in the rush to be something else."

"Because the sage commander is not trying to be anything other than what he is, his mind is not distracted. Therefore he can catch the opportunities that arise from each circumstance."

"The key to skillful action is in knowing those things that make up the environment and then arranging them so that their power becomes available."

This begins with the way things are. It is not necessary to change the nature of things in order to come to victory."

"Kindness is allowing things to be as they are rather than forcing them to be a certain way."

*(The Art of War; A New Translation, The Denma Translation Group, Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, 2001)*

**"We are human beings, we're not human doings."** (Eido Roshi)

### **Practice modesty.**

Modesty is a mix of confidence and longing. We can have confidence in our ability to respond to the challenge, even if we don't know yet what that response will be. Competence with our skills can help here. But we can also feel longing; for the horizon, for each other, for genuineness. This prevents confidence from becoming ego-centered and narrow. We can let the sea teach us confidence and let the students teach us longing. Of course, each may also teach both.

### **Challenge is choiceless.**

The rocks offer us no choice. We must do what it takes to get clear of them, or we drown. A Sea School course challenges us beyond what we might normally choose, just as life does. Morning dip is a daily practice of this. It's not about what we want or don't want. A Sea School course is not a simulation.

### **Affection**

Affection is delight in people's qualities, even their most infuriating, because it is all so human, just like us. The work of it is finding our affection for the people we can't stand. It is good for us to feel affection for our students, and appropriate to show them that we do. It is only a problem when we inject a personal, or a sexual, agenda.

### **Do not allow yourself to be protected by your role**

We should think of our role as meeting someone for the first time; of being shy, yet wanting to make friends, rather than performing. The people we are working with may be quite uncertain. We should not bowl them over with our instructorness.

### **Tell yourself to shut up.**

### **MORNING DIP**

Morning dip is an outrageous thing to do. It is a totally uninhibited, whole-hearted embrace with the world. We rarely allow ourselves so vivid an experience of being alive. We are usually confined by our fear that the world

may yet penetrate our defenses. But morning dip gives us a chance to sit on the edge of what we think is possible, feel the brilliant sharpness of that moment of uncertainty, and then plunge, and blow our minds.

That's the basic point, to heighten our state of mind and look at it. Perched on the gunwale, dreading the future, not knowing if we will actually do it or not and then suddenly finding that we've jumped and our minds for an instant as we hit the cold water completely stop, that is very revealing. We can look at our fear and hesitation, our longing for comfort, and step through it into the real world.



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### Explanation of the Sea School Crest

The Trident is Neptune's sceptre, symbol of the power of the sea. The white disk is the full moon, traditional symbol for compassion. The white waves beneath are moonlight reflected on the water, or compassion working in the world. But the Trident is also a weapon. Compassion is not just about making nice. It's about leaning into the sharp edges of things with an open heart.

### Poem by Student

Excerpt of a poem written by a student who has graduated to being an assistant instructor. She wrote this as if an instructor were speaking to a parent. It is her perception of how we work with students.

You'll have to go now.  
These here are coming with me.  
Coming with me.  
They'll show themselves  
What it is to be  
Richard or Zoe or Doug.

I don't profess to make anything happen.  
I'm not the Mad Hatter, I just serve tea.  
I don't profess to hold court  
Not King...  
Occasionally the jester.  
For they will rule themselves, these children.  
So when they return  
And you tell stories of wealth in them  
New found,  
I created nothing.  
Let it arise.

The sun was a blanket,  
The sea was a bed,  
Gave it up to each other  
Before we broke bread.



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### **Guidelines for discussion group leaders**

Gentleness allows genuineness. Lead with a light touch.  
Hold your seat but don't become centre of attention. Don't require that people look to you for approval.  
Keep things on the point  
Encourage the shy, perhaps with a direct question  
Don't let someone steal the show. Stop people gently if necessary.  
Keep it lively. You may need a provocative question ready. You might ask a particular person how the topic connects with another issue they've been talking about.

Topics to select from for discussion groups

Morning dip  
Tell yourself to shut up  
Explaining what you mean is the lowest form of teaching  
Modesty is a mix of longing and confidence  
When to step forward and when to step back  
When a student says, "Fuck you, I'm not doing it"  
Silence  
We're not out here to make nice  
Do not allow yourself to be protected by your role  
Create space, not vacuum  
Affection  
I'm not the Mad Hatter, I just serve tea  
Knowing the elements of the situation and arranging them to unleash their power  
Have more curiosity than agenda  
Kindness is allowing things to be as they are  
The sun is a blanket, the sea is a bed, give it up to each other before we break bread.

The idea in these discussions is not that the discussion leader should be the expert on the topic, but rather that the leader should have a chance to practice

fostering the understanding of the group. It will be helpful to consider beforehand your own reactions to these topics, as well as how you might apply some of the ideas presented in the material you have received to guiding any discussion regardless of topic.

These discussions serve two purposes. The first purpose is to elucidate whatever the topic may be. The second purpose is to offer practice, and feedback, in the skillful use of speech in working with others according to the Container Principle.