

Challenge by Choice and Comfort Zone Models in Adventure Experiences.

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Good Afternoon Colleagues, Friends and fellow Adventurers.

I stand before you with great honour and excitement today as we gather and contribute towards the inaugural SA AIA conference. I believe this event marks a significant milestone in our collective journey, bringing together passionate individuals and organisations who share a common goal – creating an extraordinary adventure industry that is built on a solid reputation of integrity, diversity, safety, opportunity, and growth, thus enabling those of us in the field to continue to ignite the Spirit of Adventure and meaningful experiences in the outdoors.

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My name is Alan Champkins, and I am privileged to address you today as the Head of Ndubaluba Outdoor Centre in Zambia. Ndubaluba is the only dedicated Outdoor Adventure Learning Centre in Zambia. It is also one of the few Centres on the continent that is owned by a school. Ndubaluba offers a full adventure curriculum from pre- school to upper 6 Form for Chengelo school. We run various adventure learning programs for multiple schools within Zambia. We offer on-site programs, offsite multi day expeditions and experiential learning programs as well as running the Duke of Edinburgh Adventurous Journey Award from Bronze to Gold level. Ndubaluba also runs it's own in-house adventure challenge program called Rum Doodle.

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With over two decades of experience in the experiential learning industry, combined with nine years of prior involvement in tourism, I want to share my insights on a subject that lies close to my heart—

The challenge by choice and comfort zone models in adventure experiences.

As I look out into this room, I am filled with a sense of nostalgia and appreciation. Some of the faces I see today are not mere acquaintances but people I started out in the tourism industry with almost three decades ago, and others who I've known for a significant part of my working life. For some we have walked side by side, shared stories of triumph and tribulation, and strived together to shape our parts of the adventure industry into what it is today. It is a testament to your enduring commitment and shared vision that we have come this far. Thank you.

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Today, I invite you to embark on a journey of exploration, not just of the world beyond our comfort zones but also of the transformative power that lies within our industry. Adventure

experiences are more than just adrenaline-fueled escapades; they have the potential to unlock the hidden depths of our character, challenge our assumptions, and inspire personal growth. It is within the crucible of adventure that individuals and groups discover their true potential, as they confront their fears, embrace uncertainty, and push the boundaries of what they believed possible.

Throughout my years in this industry, I have witnessed the profound impact adventure experiences can have on individuals. The euphoria of conquering a mountaintop, the sense of camaraderie forged in overcoming obstacles together, and the newfound confidence that arises from facing and surpassing personal challenges—these are the transformative elements that create lasting memories and change lives.

The concepts of "Challenge by Choice" and the "Comfort Zone" models serve as guiding principles in creating meaningful adventure experiences.

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They remind us that each individual possesses unique aspirations, fears, and limits. By offering a safe and supportive environment, we empower participants to make choices aligned with their personal comfort levels, allowing them to push themselves while respecting their boundaries. Or at least that is what we like to believe.

In the coming moments, I will delve deeper into the practical applications of the Challenge by Choice and comfort zone models. I will explore how they can be harnessed to design adventure programs that not only thrill but also facilitate personal growth, self-discovery, and resilience.

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But before we start I would like to you to do something. Put your fingers like this.....

It's a relatively simple activity but it can be really confounding also! Getting it right takes lots of practice because it involves creating a new neural pathway linking the two lobes of your brain. It's the same in real life also. We can get stuck in a comfort zone with our thinking and stop growing. The 'I've always done it this way' statement is dangerous.

Today I want us to rethink some of the models that have become the cliched backbone of the experiential adventure learning industry.

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When I first started in the experiential learning industry 19 years ago, I was privileged to have some incredible people to mentor and challenge me in my concepts of what it meant to run adventure programs for schools and young people. At the same time many people had the perception that 'all you need is a ball to play games with the kids' and 'it's all about having fun'

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In preparing for this conference, I put together a list of 95 models, theories and key concepts that are fundamental to experiential adventure learning. The days of only 'entertaining kids' are a thing of the past. Today, being a professional in the industry is a huge responsibility, not to be taken lightly. Working with young people means we are working with the future!

Let's begin by looking at the Challenge by Choice and Comfort Zone models and take it from there.

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The Challenge by Choice concept was coined originally by Karl Rohnke and developed through his role at Outward Bound and later popularised by Project Adventure. Rohnke had found that some urban youth were reluctant to participate in adventure activities and he was uncomfortable forcing them to participate in challenges.

It was in giving people the option to choose to participate in adventurous activities that Rohnke found greater success in adventure learning.

Challenge by Choice has become a foundational principle and a standard operating procedure for adventure experiential learning.

According to Rohnke (1989) Challenge by Choice offers participants.

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- 1) The chance to try a potentially difficult and or frightening challenge in an atmosphere of support and caring.

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- 2) The opportunity to 'back off' when performance pressures or self-doubt become too strong, knowing that an opportunity for a future attempt will always be available.

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- 3) The chance to try difficult tasks, recognising that the attempt is more important than performance results.

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- 4) Respect for individuals' ideas and choices.

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Challenge by choice was designed from the outset to invite participant involvement in challenging activities, believing that, by offering choices amongst various levels of challenges participants would be inclined to join in these activities voluntarily, if not eagerly.

Project Adventure describes Challenge by Choice as follows:

Challenge by Choice asks that participants challenge themselves and participate fully in the experience. Recognizing that any activity or goal may pose a different level and type of challenge for each group member and that authentic personal change comes from within, Challenge by Choice creates an environment where participants are asked to search for opportunities to stretch and grow during the experience.

Challenge by choice was developed as a model that invited participants to take part in adventurous experiences and encouraged involvement rather than as a means of opting out of an adventurous activity.

The second model I want to look at today has also become a foundational concept within adventure learning and is used in conjunction with the Challenge by Choice model in many outdoor programs.

The second model is called the Comfort Zone model.

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The Comfort or Learning Zone Model' was developed by Tom Senninger, a German Educator and Adventurer. The model is based on Lev Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development. The comfort zone model encourages us to see positive experiences as learning experiences and helps individuals to understand and expand their own boundaries and 'comfort zones'.

The standard comfort zone model consists of 3 concentric zones – the inner zone is the comfort zone, the middle zone the growth zone and the out zone the panic or danger zone.

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Some models add a 'Don't waste my time' zone at the centre and a 'fear zone' between the comfort and growth zones.

In a nutshell, the comfort zone is the place where things are familiar to us be it people, places, or things. People in this zone are comfortable don't have to take any risks. This is the place where a person feels safe, can rest, reflect and even set boundaries. However, the comfort zone, according to the model does not offer any opportunities for growth or learning and lingering to long in the comfort zone can be a hindrance to personal growth.

The second zone known as the growth zone is the space where a person's existing skills and abilities are stretched, allowing them to learn and develop new ones. Moving into the learning zone normally involves getting uncomfortable and facing ones fears – hence some people add an intermediary zone called the fear zone in between the comfort and learning zones. Pushing oneself to face new challenges in the growth zone can have a positive impact on a persons development.

The last zone is called the panic zone. This is the zone where people move beyond what they are familiar or comfortable with. This is the zone where the person cannot cope with the stress or challenge, they are faced with, begin to feel overwhelmed and face stress they cannot deal with. As a result, they shut down and may freeze, fight or flight as a way of getting out of the panic zone as fast as possible. This zone is damaging and demotivating and adventure learning professionals need to keep their participants out of this zone.

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Two other theories used in adventure experiences have a similar influence on a person's performance and growth but I shall not be discussing them here. The first is the Peak Adventure or Adventure Paradigm model that looks at the relationship between Risk and Experience in adventure activities.

The second is Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory. Flow theory looks at a participant's state of mind and when in the place of being fully absorbed during an intense activity and how this corresponded to being in an optimal psycho – physical state that inspired optimal performance.

Lastly, the Challenge by Choice and Comfort Zone models work within the framework of Kolb's Experiential Learning theory.

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This is the third foundational model for adventure based experiential learning.

Experiential learning involves the transformation of experience into effective learning.

Kolb's experiential learning theory stresses how our experiences, including our thoughts, emotions and environment, impact the learning process.

Kolb's theory defines experiential learning as a four-stage cyclical process:

1. **Concrete learning** occurs when a learner has a new experience or interprets a previous experience in a new way. For example, a participant has to learn a new interpersonal skill to work better as a team.
2. **Reflective observation** – the learner reflects on the new experience to understand what it means. In our example, the participant might think about how they could have done the activity better as team.
3. **Abstract conceptualisation** – the learner adapts their thinking or constructs new ideas based on experience and reflection. For example, the participant realises they need to have a strategy they all agree to before starting the next activity.
4. **Active experimentation** – the learner applies their new ideas to real-world situations to test whether they work and see if any changes need to be made. This process can happen quickly or over an extended time. The participant might note much better the team functions at overcoming a challenge when they strategize together.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle creates the intentionality and builds on the learning experience of the participants as they choose to challenge themselves and grow by moving out of their comfort zones, facing their fears and learning new skills.

The three models of Challenge by Choice, Comfort Zones and Experiential Learning Cycles are fundamental to Adventure based experiential learning and need to be clearly understood and applied by professionals to create a successful adventure program.

There are a number of advantages to using the Comfort Zone and Challenge by Choice models in outdoor programming. These models advantages are particularly important to know for experiential learning activities (eg school camps, corporate team building events etc) but they can also be applied to other adventure based activities to help one better understand the clients 'emotional' position and their ability to make choices during an activity.

These models have several advantages that contribute to the overall success and positive impact of such experiences. Here are some of the key advantages:

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1. **Personal Growth and Development:** By allowing participants to choose their level of challenge, they have the opportunity to step outside their comfort zones at their own pace. This promotes personal growth and development as individuals can gradually build their skills and confidence, leading to a sense of accomplishment.

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2. **Enhanced Self-Awareness:** Participants are encouraged to assess their abilities and limitations honestly when presented with choices. This fosters self-awareness and helps them understand their strengths and areas for improvement.

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3. **Increased Motivation and Engagement:** When individuals have control over their level of challenge, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in the activity. This sense of autonomy can lead to a deeper commitment to the experience.

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4. **Empowerment and Decision-Making Skills:** Making choices about challenges empowers participants and strengthens their decision-making skills. They learn to evaluate risks and benefits, leading to more confident and informed choices.

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5. **Adaptability and Resilience:** Adventure experiences inherently involve uncertainty and unpredictability. Allowing participants to choose their challenges helps them develop adaptability and resilience, as they learn to navigate various situations and outcomes.

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6. **Inclusivity and Accessibility:** The model accommodates individuals with different skill levels and abilities. Everyone can participate in the adventure experience, regardless of their starting point, as they have the freedom to choose appropriate challenges.

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7. **Positive Group Dynamics:** In group settings, the comfort zone and challenge by choice models promote a supportive and encouraging environment. Participants can respect each other's choices and celebrate each other's achievements, fostering positive group dynamics.

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8. **Reduction of Anxiety and Fear:** Participants may experience fear or anxiety in adventure activities. By having control over the level of challenge, they can manage these emotions more effectively, reducing the risk of overwhelming negative experiences.

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9. **Long-Term Impact:** The skills and confidence gained through these experiences often extend beyond the adventure activity. Participants can apply the lessons learned in other aspects of life, such as work, relationships, and personal goals.

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10. **Customization and Flexibility:** Adventure facilitators can tailor the experience to suit the needs and goals of specific groups or individuals. This customization ensures that the activity remains relevant and impactful.

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11. **Promotes Teamwork and Support:** Participants can encourage each other to take on challenges, leading to enhanced teamwork and mutual support within the group.

When combined, the comfort zone and challenge by choice models in adventure experiences should provide a balanced approach that maximizes personal growth, fosters positive group dynamics, and creates a lasting impact on participants.

But does it?

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For years I accepted the Challenge by Choice and Comfort Zone models as the 'gospel of experiential learning'. All the books I had read, all the activities I had learnt and by and large most of the people I met and worked with did the same. I found myself in my own comfort zone when it came to challenge by choice.

There were many times when I should have questioned why some students arrived unsettled and were then challenged to get in to their 'growth zone' during activities only to have to deal with their consistent bad behaviour...

When I should have questioned why the girl did not want to be picked up on the spiders web activity yet her team mates 'encouraged her' to complete the activity and afterwards she no longer wanted to be part of her team even though they had successfully completed the activity and 'learnt' from it.

Or why the teenager who was a regular on our holiday camps never returned the following holiday when he became terrified of heights on a steep hillside and was ridiculed by his peers for not facing his fears.

Or when the young man felt dejected and useless because he was the only one in his team who could not ring the bell at the top of the climbing tower.

Or why I begun to measure the success of the program by every student completing all the activities and the teachers praising us for getting what they paid for.

After all, the teachers had booked the venue and the school was paying for the program so everyone must have wanted to be there and it was important to ensure that the program and outcomes were achieved otherwise we were not fulfilling our mandate.

Fortunately the cracks began to show and I began to ask questions. One of the questions I asked myself was “Can I honestly say everyone who came on the program genuinely wants to come back?

Or was I turning people away from the outdoors and its benefits because their experience was overall negative?

I began to take note of what I saw as limitations or disadvantages to the way I was using the challenge by choice and comfort zone models and wondered if others were noticing the same?

These are some of the disadvantages I noticed:

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1. **Lack of genuine Choice:** Teachers chose the venue and the program outcomes with little to no consultation with students. The choice for students to attend their school camp was often non-existent or very limited. Program structure and design can also limit or shape the choices available to participants.

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2. **Starting in the wrong Comfort Zone:** It was assumed that students would automatically begin their camp experience in the comfort zone. In hindsight the majority arrived in their fear or growth zone and sometimes even their panic zone. Creating further discomfort before making them feel safe and secure set the tone for behavioural challenges during the program.

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3. **Peer Pressure, Comparison and Social Embarrassment:** The concept of free choice is limited in group settings as some participants may feel pressured to choose challenges beyond their safe zone due to the fear of being perceived as weak or less capable than others, or not being accepted, or letting the team down.

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4. **Facipulation (Facilitator manipulation):** Even the most genuinely concerned facilitator on an activity can use their position and influence to ‘encourage’ or manipulate an individual to participate in an activity against their better judgement

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5. **Behaviour is a form of language:** Participants who are misbehaving, frequently going to the toilet, or suddenly being quiet and non-communicative, amongst other things may not be because of bad behaviour, but because they trying to avoid taking part in the activity due to any number of reasons. Failing to recognise this leads to further negative behaviour and exclusion from the group.

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6. **Risk of Overconfidence:** Participants may overestimate their abilities and choose challenges that are too difficult for them, leading to potential safety risks and negative experiences.

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7. **Rotational models for activities:** Large group program often rely on rotational models for activities from start to finish. Unless intentionally planned, this often results in a poor sequencing of activities resulting in participants being pushed beyond their growth zones before they have got the basics in place.

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8. **One box for all:** Participants are often assumed to be at the same level of understanding, fitness, skills, and learning styles. Poor program design and a lack of understanding of unity through diversity enhances the problems of labelling everyone in the same box.

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9. **Potential for Exclusion:** While the models aim to be inclusive, individuals with specific physical or psychological limitations may still feel excluded or unable to find suitable challenges.

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10. **Lack of Guidance and Direction:** Participants, especially those inexperienced in adventure activities, may struggle to make informed choices about appropriate challenges without proper guidance from facilitators.

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11. **Difficulty in Assessment:** It can be challenging for facilitators to gauge participants' true abilities accurately, potentially leading to misjudgements in the appropriateness of the levels of challenges.

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12. **Disappointment and Frustration:** Some participants may find challenges that are too easy or not engaging enough, or too hard, leading to feelings of disappointment or frustration, or behavioural challenges. Bored children and over stimulated children tend to be seen as 'being naughty'.

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13. **Potential for Group Fragmentation:** When participants begin to feel they are letting their group down or feeling like they are not good enough it runs the risk of potentially fragmenting the group and reducing the shared experience.

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14. **Safety Concerns:** Participating in risk based activities has to involve freedom of choice and willing participation and participants need to be able set their own boundaries. Failure to do so increases emotional, psychological and physical risk.

I've been critically looking at the programs I run over the last five years or so. There were two critical defining moments that enabled me to get out of my own comfort zone around the choice and the programs I ran.

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The first was thanks to Tom Leahy and his series called “The Elements of Choice”

The second was thanks to Claudia Roodt and her teachings on Trauma Informed Practices and Mental Health.

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I’m now on a ‘mission’ develop a framework for experiential adventure learning programs that firstly recognises that we need to create a environment of psychological safety and trust as our first priority on a program and keep referring back to that. We need to create a model that enables all participants to find their comfort zone as quickly as possible at the start of a program and to allow them to return to that zone at any point during the activities, without them being excluded from participating.

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Secondly, that framework needs to empower participants engagement through their ability to make free choices that encourages and respects age appropriate individual autonomy whilst promoting attachment to the group and or community.

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Thirdly the framework needs to facilitate personal growth through engagement in meaningful and relevant experiences that result in profound, measurable adventure learning experiences.

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And lastly understanding that growth in a risk based experience is most successful when the participant is empowered to choose from an internal locus of control rather than an external locus of control.

How am I doing at this?

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I’ve come to see participation in experiential learning activities means different things to different people. One person’s participation may mean finishing the activity first. To another it may be observing from the side and providing an external source of advice or encouragement to their team.

I’ve come to hear the ability to say “No” as a powerful life skill that is lacking in a world that expects compliance and conformity. I’m in a place where I celebrate a person’s “No” and still find a way for them to ‘participate’ at a level of involvement they feel safe with.

I've come to realise that a person is 'Brave for trying' rather than a 'failure for not finishing'. I realise that giving your best is far more important than 'being the best' and that is all that is required.

I've come to believe that people will push themselves further when they are part of a trusting and supportive community where they feel valued and my job is to promote that environment more than it is to 'encourage' a person to step out of their comfort zone. Emotional safety needs to be prioritised above all other forms of safety. My job is not to get people out of their comfort zones, my job is to create the space where people feel comfortable so they can choose how and when they want to leave their own comfort zone.

I now believe that stressful situations and risk whether perceived or real do not necessarily equate with successful learning outcomes. We should rather be looking for the activities that can present the best learning outcomes at the lowest possible risk rather than thinking the opposite. Pushing comfort zones does not equate with peak learning experiences.

I need to ensure I am respecting participants need for safety, their boundaries and their ability to make choice. I don't want participants comfort zones to get smaller every time they fail in the growth zone because their boundaries, sense of safety and freedom of choice has been limited.

In applying these principles I've come to see far greater effectiveness and engagement in the programs I run and oversee. I've not thrown the Challenge by Choice and Comfort zone models out of the window, though Karl Ronhke might be turning in his grave at the thought that I'm no longer using his model to encourage full participation in an adventurous activity but using it to encourage freedom of choice in a safe zone.

Have I got it right yet? No, not completely.

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I'm still trying to see if it is possible to balance a person centric, activity centric and outcome centric approach to adventure based experiential learning programs? The person centric approach empowers individuals to make informed choices about their level of involvement and the building of trusts between individuals but it may not result in the activities being finished or the outcomes of the program being achieved.

At the opposite end the outcome centric approach has a specific learning objective to achieve and this often means that participants have little opportunity to make free choices and deviate from the pre-determined objectives of the program.

A person centric approach aligns itself more with therapy, whilst the outcomes centric approach aligns itself more with a schools reasons for bringing their students to a camp.

Is it possible to balance the two through an activity centric program?

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Another area I'm still trying to reconcile is that of freedom of choice and its implications on a school program. People do learn through struggle and life is not about taking the easy option, but about being willing to push through 'pain' and uncomfortable situations. If we give people free choice in everything will they automatically take the 'easy option' and opt out, thereby never learning to push themselves, persevere, endure, overcome and solve problems to make our lives and place of living better?

There are advantages and disadvantages to the concepts of freedom of choice, limited choice and no choice on a program. These advantages and disadvantages vary depending on context, age group and the people involved. Finding the right balance between the three is crucial in designing a successful adventure program that meets the needs and preferences of the participants while maintaining safety, structure and program objectives.

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I'm currently on an adventure to make adventure based experiential learning even more relevant and impactful. I believe it is an important tool that when used properly can have a deep and lasting effect people and places. I've got the privilege to work with young people in the outdoors. It's not always easy but it is an honour to work with a generation that will one day be the decision makers for a new generation. I want to leave the best possible legacy for future generations and I believe part of that legacy involves shifting our own paradigms and concepts of challenge by choice and comfort zone models.

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I'd love to hear your thoughts and comments and welcome you to journey with me.

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Thank you

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