

## Kurt Hahn and the roots of Expeditionary Learning

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Kurt Hahn at Gordonstoun House in 1938. Hahn was headmaster of two private boarding schools in Europe and founder of Outward Bound. Gordonstoun

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Early in his life, Kurt Hahn had a vision of the kind of school he wanted to create, and it was nothing like the school he went to.

Hahn was born in Germany in 1886 to a wealthy Jewish family. He was sent to the Königliche Wilhelms-Gymnasium, a high school in Berlin. It was an authoritarian, rigidly academic place, in Hahn's view, where everything was focused on getting students to pass a big test — the “Abitur” — that would determine whether they could go on to university.

Hahn loved to read and learn, but he hated school. He referred to his gymnasium as a “torment box,” according to one biographer. Hahn longed for something different, as revealed in a novel he wrote when he was in his 20s.

“There's an incident in the middle of the novel where a young kid has this idea for writing an essay that expresses a deep passion inside him,” says Tom James, an education historian and provost at Teacher's College, Columbia who has written about Hahn.

The boy puts a great deal of energy into writing the essay.

“He takes it to his teacher, who is a very stern, German school teacher of the 19th century,” says James. “And when the teacher looks at it, he laughs at him in front of the whole class.”

The boy then leaves school and travels to the countryside with his mother. They go boating and hiking.

“So there's this contrast of this wonderful world of lived experience versus the treatment by this very formal school,” says James. “That in many ways is the spring or the fountainhead for the philosophy of Kurt Hahn.”

Hahn wanted to create a school where students would *do* things, not listen to stern teachers lecture. It would be a school designed to help kids discover their interests and passions, not just prepare them for tests.

## Starting a School

Hahn passed the Abitur, and went on to Oxford. He was a peripatetic student, studying classics for two years at Oxford, then attending various German universities, and eventually returning to Oxford.

But in 1914, when World War I broke out, Hahn was called back to Germany. He never completed a degree.

**“Education must enable young people to effect what they have recognized to be right, despite hardships, despite dangers, despite inner skepticism, despite boredom and despite mockery from the world.” –Kurt Hahn**

During the war, Hahn was assigned to the German Foreign Office. His job was to read English language newspapers and report on the public mood in enemy countries. It was a shocking and sobering experience to be at war with England, where he had lived for so many years.

“The war was this tremendous breach of civilization,” says historian Tom James. “So much was unleashed, violence and hatred among peoples.”

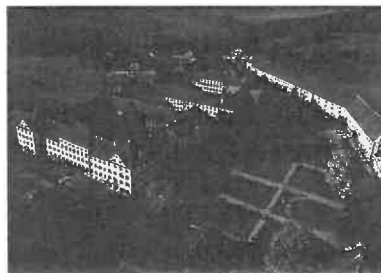
Living through World War I got Hahn thinking again about the purpose of school.

“He felt the project of education should be to develop young people who were ready to be citizens in a new kind of world,” says James.

After the War, Hahn got a job as private secretary to Prince Max von Baden, who had served briefly as Germany’s chancellor. They moved to the ancestral castle of Prince Max’s family in southern Germany, where Hahn helped the prince write his memoirs. There they discussed projects “to renew the ethical traditions of German social life,” according to James. “Traditions they believed were threatened not only by extremism on the right and left, but by incomprehension, moral failings, and lack of will in the middle.”

The best way to combat this threat, they thought, was to start a school.

So in 1920, in Prince Max’s family castle, they opened the Schule Schloss Salem, or Salem Castle School (“salem” means place of peace). It’s a co-ed private boarding school that still exists today. Hahn was the founding headmaster.



The school grounds of Schloss Salem, a private boarding school in Germany started by Kurt Hahn.

## **The Seven Laws of Salem**

Hahn developed a set of principles to guide education at the school. He called his principles the "Seven Laws of Salem."

*1. Give the children opportunities for self-discovery.*

"Every girl and boy has a 'grande passion,' often hidden and unrealised to the end of life... It can and will be revealed by the child coming into close touch with a number of different activities."

*2. Make the children meet with triumph and defeat.*

"Salem believes you ought to discover the child's weakness as well as his strength. Allow him to engage in enterprises in which he is likely to fail, and do not hush up his failure. Teach him to overcome defeat."

*3. Give the children the opportunity of self-effacement in the common cause.*

"Even the youngsters ought to undertake tasks which are of definite importance for the community."

*4. Provide periods of silence.*

"Unless the present-day generation acquires early habits of quiet and reflection, it will be speedily and prematurely used up by the nerve exhausting and distracting civilization of today."

*5. Train the imagination.*

"You must call it into action, otherwise it becomes atrophied like a muscle not in use. The power to resist the pressing stimulus of the hour and the moment cannot be acquired in later life; it often depends on the ability to visualize what you plan and hope and fear for the future."

*6. Make games important but not predominant.*

"Athletics do not suffer by being put in their place. In fact you restore the dignity of the usurper by dethroning him."

*7. Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.*

"[R]ich girls and boys wholly thrown into each other's company are not given a chance of growing into men and women who can overcome. Let them share the experience of an enthralling school life with sons and daughters of those who have to struggle for their existence. No school can build up a tradition of self discipline on vigorous but joyous endeavour, unless at least 30% of the children come from homes where life is not only simple but even hard."

Hahn's time at the Salem School in Germany was cut short when Adolph Hitler came to power. In 1932, Hahn sent a letter to all of the Salem School alumni.

"Salem cannot remain neutral," the letter said. "I ask the members of the Salem Union who are active in S. A. or S. S. to break with Salem or break with Hitler."

The Nazis threw Hahn in jail. But he had powerful friends in England who got him out. In 1933, Hahn fled to Britain.

## **Gordonstoun**



Gordonstoun House, c. 1935, photographed by Hugh Miles (formerly Hubertus Levin), a pupil at the school before World War II. Gordonstoun

Hahn was profoundly depressed. He had lost his school and his country. He went to Moray, Scotland, a place that had special significance for him.

As a teenager, Hahn had apparently suffered a severe case of sunstroke, probably while hiking. It affected him for the rest of his life. He had to avoid prolonged time outside, and always wore a hat. At times fluid would build up in his brain and he would have to spend several days resting in a dark room. (There is some dispute about the sunstroke story. It is widely cited in writings about Hahn, but the late head of the Kurt Hahn Archives in Germany claimed Hahn did not suffer from sunstroke but instead suffered from a condition that caused a narrowing of the duct between his brain and spinal cord. In any event, Hahn did take precautions throughout his life to avoid the sun, and did spend periods convalescing in darkened rooms.)



Students at Gordonstoun were required to do 'practical work.' This photograph shows boys laying flagstones during a renovation of one of the school's buildings, c. 1955. The man in the back on the left is Kurt Hahn. Gordonstoun

During one of these periods of rest while studying at Oxford, Hahn went to Moray. The weather there was cool and rainy, perfect for a man who could not tolerate sunlight. Returning to Moray in 1933, he met old friends who encouraged him to start a school there.

Less than a year later, in April of 1934, Hahn founded Gordonstoun, on a 17th century estate near the rocky coast of the North Sea.

At Gordonstoun, Hahn was able to further develop what quickly became a distinctive and highly coveted approach to education. Prince Philip and Prince Charles went to Gordonstoun. This was the kind of education rich people were willing to pay for.

The school still exists today. It's one of Britain's most distinguished private boarding schools. Gordonstoun is co-ed now, but in the beginning it was just for boys.

### **'You demand the maximum effort of each boy'**

Hahn brought the ideas laid out in the Seven Laws of Salem to Gordonstoun.

To help promote self-discovery, students took silent walks in the woods.

**"The effort of a boy who jumps 4 foot 4 and is very clumsy is as great as the effort of the boy who is a brilliant athlete and reaches almost 6 feet in his high jump."** –Kurt Hahn

"The silent walk was a chance to go outdoors and to be in nature with one's thoughts," says James. It gave students an opportunity to think, "What is it that I'm trying to do today?" says James. "What am I learning?" Hahn believed meaningful education required this kind of quiet reflection.

All those years reading classics at Oxford had instilled in Hahn a deep appreciation for the ancient Greek ideal that education should be aimed at producing a complete person, one who had developed intellectually, morally, aesthetically — and physically too. At Gordonstoun, every day began with a run before breakfast.

Hahn was not a big fan of competitive sports, however. He didn't like the way school athletes tended to be worshipped like heroes. Instead, he required each student to have an individual "training plan" that would challenge him to reach "a standard of physical achievement good enough to draw self-respect."



The Michael Kirk, built in 1705, was used regularly as the school chapel in the early days. Students had to walk to chapel in contemplative silence. Gordonstoun School

“You demand the maximum effort of each boy,” Hahn said. “The effort of a boy who jumps 4 foot 4 and is very clumsy is as great as the effort of the boy who is a brilliant athlete and reaches almost 6 feet in his high jump. The triumph in the sphere of one’s weaknesses is greater and more satisfying than the triumph in the sphere of one’s strength,” he said.

Hahn was a big believer in the power of failure. He thought children needed to experience failure, so they would learn how to persevere when things are hard.

“It is possible to wait on a child’s inclinations and gifts and arrange carefully for an unbroken series of successes,” he said. “You may make him or her happy that way, but you certainly cripple him for the battle of life. It is our business to plunge the children into enterprises in which they are likely to fail, and we may not hush up that failure.”

## **Experiential Learning**



An exhibition of student projects in Duffus Village Hall c. 1961. Gordonstoun

Hahn is considered one of the modern fathers of “experiential education.” The idea that children should *do* things in school, rather than just sit and receive information, was what first propelled him to start thinking so deeply about education.

During Hahn’s time as headmaster, one of the central features of education at Gordonstoun was something called “The Project.” These projects could be about pretty much anything that interested the student.

“It can be a project of exploration, it can be a project of research, of music, of painting,” said Hahn. “It only must have one common characteristic. It must have a very refined target that can only be reached by victorious patience and tenacity.”



Repairing a motorbike in the Pocock Workshops with the Head of Technology, John Cleaver, in the early 1970s. Gordonstoun

Projects included things like researching a piece of art, building a boat, fixing a car, or composing a piece of music.

Boys at Gordonstoun also took traditional classes to prepare them for university entrance exams.

“Examinations are one very effective method of training the willpower. I wouldn’t miss them for anything,” Hahn said. “But I am equally certain that the project, chosen by the boy, carried through with purposeful tenacity to a well-defined goal, can tap the hidden reserves of the mind in a way that an examination can rarely do.”

## **Grading at Gordonstoun**

Another distinctive feature of education at Gordonstoun: boys kept track of their own marks, or grades. They also kept track of whether they did their homework or were late for class. It was part of a system of self-discipline to teach boys to be responsible and trustworthy.

There was a “Final Report” that went out to parents. It was virtually a duplicate of the report card Hahn had developed at Salem, according to Joshua Miner, an American teacher who taught at Gordonstoun in the 1950s.

“It was like no report card I had ever seen,” wrote Miner in an essay. “More than any other educator of whom I was aware, Hahn practiced the philosophy that education had a twin objective: to enable the student to make intelligent judgments and to develop the inherent strength of his selfhood (to build character, in the old-fashioned phrase).”

Here’s what students were graded on in the “Salem School Final Student Report”:

- Esprit de corps
- Sense of justice
- Ability to state facts precisely
- Ability to follow out what he believes to be the right course in the face of discomforts, hardships, dangers, mockery, boredom, skepticism, and impulses of the moment
- Ability to plan
- Imagination
- Ability to organize shown in the disposition of work and in the direction of young boys
- Ability to deal with the unexpected
- Degree of mental concentration where the task in question interests him, where it does not
- Conscientiousness
  - in everyday affairs
  - in tasks with which he is specially entrusted
- Manners
- Manual dexterity
- Standard reached in school subjects:
  - German (*author’s note: Students were assessed in German at Salem. Presumably boys were graded in English at Gorsdonstoun*)

- Ancient Languages
  - Modern Languages
  - Natural Science
  - Mathematics
  - History
- Practical Work (Handicraft, etc.)
- Art work
- Physical exercises
  - Fighting spirit
  - Endurance
  - Reaction time

## **Expeditions**

Kurt Hahn believed that learning required challenge. One of the ways Hahn challenged his students was to send them on expeditions to the woods, the mountains and the sea. These were multi-day trips where boys learned to face the elements.

**“The experience of helping a fellow man in danger, or even of training in a realistic manner to be ready to give this help, tends to change the balance of power in a youth’s inner life with the result that compassion can become the master motive.”** –Kurt Hahn

“Experience has taught us that expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character,” said Hahn.

Boys learned grit and perseverance and how to work together.

“Hahn believed nature teaches us necessity,” says James. “You’re working in an environment you cannot predict. It’s going to produce challenges and weather and darkness before you’re ready for darkness. Experience in nature is so important in teaching people to be more resourceful and more grounded in themselves.”

*Plus est en Vous*: There is more in you (than you think). Hahn had once seen that line etched into the stone of a Belgian church. It became the Gordonstoun school motto.



## **The Rescue Services**



Students in the Fire Service. Gordonstoun

The most important element of education at Gordonstoun, according to Hahn, was the rescue service.

Philosopher William James inspired the idea. In 1906, reflecting on the horror of the American Civil War, James had challenged educators and statesmen to come up with something that would unite young men for the purposes of good rather than destruction.

“So far, war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community,” said James. Men needed something else, some activity or enterprise that could tame their “innate pugnacity.” James called this thing “the moral equivalent of war.”

For Hahn, the rescue services were that moral equivalent. There was a coastal rescue service, a mountain rescue service, and a fire rescue service. Boys were required to join one of the services. They learned how to provide emergency assistance and were actually involved in fighting fires, tracking down missing hikers, and rescuing sailors whose ships had wrecked along the rocky coast nearby. Students were on duty whenever catastrophe called.

Think about that for a minute. High school kids, pulled out of class or awoken in the middle of the night, to go fight a fire! And this, according to Hahn, was the most important element of education at Gordonstoun. More important than preparation for exams. More important than projects.



The Gordonstoun Fire Service attend the 1983 Orton rail crash, which took place near Elgin, Moray. Gordonstoun

## **Why were the rescue services so important?**

Here's what Hahn said in a speech in 1960:

“The experience of helping a fellow man in danger, or even of training in a realistic manner to be ready to give this help, tends to change the balance of power in a youth’s inner life with the result that compassion can become the master motive.”

What Hahn was ultimately trying to do in his schools was create compassionate people.

(Students at Gordonstoun still serve in rescue services. There are twelve services now.)

## **The Birth of Outward Bound**

What Hahn was doing at Gordonstoun caught the attention of a man named Lawrence Holt. Holt’s son was a student at Gordonstoun. It was 1940, World War II had just begun, and Holt — the owner of a large British shipping company — was gravely concerned about how many of his young seamen were dying in the North Atlantic after German submarines torpedoed their ships.

“When the ships were out in the water and people were in lifeboats, he noticed a pattern that many of the younger sailors were dying on the water before they could be rescued,” says James. “They’d be out there in the cold of the North Atlantic. And the older sailors, the more experienced ones who had been trained in the old wooden sailing ships, were hardier. They had a stamina and an ability to survive that the young did not have.”



Surf Life-Saving practice at Cove Bay c. 1970. The Surf Life-Saving Service (SLS) started in the early 1960s, and the students were required to practice reel and line drills and beach and sea work, even in challenging weather conditions.  
Gordonstoun

Holt thought his young sailors needed something to teach them the skills and the will to survive out there in the ocean, something akin to what the boys at Gordonstoun were getting with the rescue services, and the expeditions.

Holt asked for Hahn’s help, and together they created Outward Bound. It was a month-long course that included an expedition across three mountain ranges, rescue training, and volunteer work in the local community. Holt came up with the name Outward Bound, which is the nautical term for a ship leaving port on a sea journey.

The first Outward Bound School opened in 1941 in Aberdovey, Wales. The training was not just for merchant seamen. Police and fire cadets as well as young men about to go into the military were

among the students. Outward Bound continued after the war, offering wilderness expeditions to foster fitness and tenacity among British young people.

Today, Outward Bound is an international outdoor education program with schools in more than 30 countries.

“Outward Bound has come to mean many things in different places,” according to James. “At its heart ... is Hahn’s conviction that it is possible, even in a relatively short time, to introduce greater balance and compassion into human lives by impelling people into experiences which show them they can rise above adversity and overcome their own defeatism. They can make more of their lives than they thought they could, and learn to serve others with their strength.”

## After Gordonstoun



Gordonstoun House, top right, and the Round Square building, below, c. 1970. Gordonstoun

Hahn left Gordonstoun in 1952. He went on to help found several more schools and educational organizations. A worldwide network of independent schools that share his philosophy was also created. It's called Round Square International, named after the Round Square building at Gordonstoun, a former stable block built in a circular formation around the estate's main square.

Hahn became known around the world for his distinctive educational approach, though he insisted that none of his ideas were original. In speeches, he often told the story of an American educator who came to Salem School for a tour with Prince Max.

Here's how Hahn tells the story: The American educator, after getting a tour of the schools' various campuses, said to the Prince, "What are you proudest of in these beautiful schools?" And Prince Max said, "If you go the length and breadth of them, there's nothing original in them. That is what I am proud of. We have stolen from everywhere, from the Boy Scouts, from Plato, from Goethe."

The American responded: "Ought you not to aim at being original?"

**"I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion." –Kurt Hahn**

Prince Max answered, "No, it is in education as in medicine. You must harvest the wisdom of a thousand years. If ever you come to a surgeon and he wants to take out your appendix in the most original manner possible, I would strongly advise you to go to another surgeon."

Though Hahn was well known in certain educational circles, he felt frustrated at the end of his life that his ideas – and the ideas of those he'd stolen from – were not more mainstream in education.

“Our influence is not wide enough,” Hahn told the audience in a 1960 address to the Outward Bound Trust. “There is little penetration into the established system of education.”

Outward Bound had begun as an extension of Hahn's ideas about schooling, but the organization now existed quite separate from conventional schools. Hahn wanted his ideas about experiential learning and character development to have broader impact.

“I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion,” Hahn said in a speech a few years before he died. “We must face the fact that many young grow up at the mercy of surroundings which do not transmit incentives to develop” these qualities.

Kurt Hahn died in Germany in 1974. He was buried at Salem.

Nearly 20 years after his death, Hahn's ideas caught the attention of a group of American CEOs. At the urging of the George H. W. Bush administration, the CEOs had issued a request for proposals for what they called “break-the-mold” designs for reforming U.S. public schools. In response, Outward Bound USA partnered with the Harvard Graduate School of Education to design a model based on the ideas of Kurt Hahn. They called their school model “Expeditionary Learning.”

The American CEOs apparently loved the idea. It was one of a handful of proposals, out of hundreds, to be funded.

Today, there are more than 160 Expeditionary Learning schools in the United States.