



Games and Play: Jaroslav Foglar's Influence on Czech Education in Nature

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Introduction

In the 20th century Baden Powell and Kurt Hahn had particular influence over the development of outdoor education in the UK specifically related to Scouting and Outward Bound® organisations, which have progressed and had significant impact internationally. Similarly, in the Czech Republic the ideas of Jaroslav Foglar (1907-1999) have influenced the development of education in various nature settings.

This article focuses on the cross-cultural idea of 'education in nature'. In its Czech form: games and play in nature. It was the Czech educator John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), who originally supported the use of 'games' and 'play' in achieving educational outcomes and recognised the importance of travelling as a means of completing youth education. Comenius believed in an holistic learning process that began and ended with experience involving one's own senses, and that teaching and life long learning must be interconnected with experience in nature.

The characteristic features of the modern Czech Republic's experiential learning methods are strongly connected with the experimental work of *Vacation School Lipnice* (VSL), which is a non-profit, non-government organization of about 100 active members-volunteers from all over the Czech Republic, Slovakia and other countries. Their work has been discussed in several studies dealing with the dramaturgy methods of programme design and ways of experiential education shaped and refined by and within the Czech culture ⁽¹⁾. In 1993 VSL founded Outward Bound Ceska Cesta Ltd to provide corporate teambuilding and management training courses using the VSL dramaturgy

method of course design. What differentiates VSL courses, from traditional outdoor adventure approaches, is the instructor's role in planning the course 'dramaturgy' ⁽²⁾ i.e. the framing of a range of 'games' often involving reflection and fantasy, and the development of a learning environment providing an atmosphere of physical and emotional safety that allows participants (often adults) to learn from 'playing'.

This article focuses upon encouraging play and games at a programme level in the context of outdoor and adventure education settings. It also provides background to the work of Jaroslav Foglar and his influence through his stories of adventure and mystery on at least three generations' relationship to nature, camping and scouting.

things about him/herself and about the others in a game. Within this safe and supportive environment participants can leave fears and apprehensions, and elicit potential for deeper emotions, intensive communication, and truthful behaviour. Games can be seen as a playground for acting out various interactions and evaluating reactions in different outdoor natural or urban environments, and many games are designed specifically for indoor settings. This play stage or exploration and experimentation stage of the adventure experience is important in developing 'peak experiences' and a 'state of flow'. Fun and play are also important in removing social barriers and stress, and increasing intrinsic motivation and relaxation. This importance is often reinforced during activities which involve psychological and/or perceived physical risk, and push participants to extend their 'comfort zone'.

Games and Play

The Czech approach to experiential education uses play in truly the widest sense of the word. Besides sport and movement games; semi-structured, strategic and psychological, games are integrated with creative fine art, musical and dramatical games as an essential part of the programme design. The philosophy of play ranks among the deepest and richest expressions of human ways of being.

Games allow participants to be spontaneous, make mistakes, and to try and discover new



What makes a game connect to normality is the fact that the emotions, processes and interactions during a 'game' are often real. Games allow participants to remove themselves from familiar environments. They provide opportunities to extend personal boundaries and explore self, social interaction, and play. The aim of a particular game is primarily dependent on its place in the overall course dramaturgy, framing, set-up of the game, and the developing group dynamics. A specific game focus may appear as 'physical' on one course and as 'social' on another. For example 'Land Art' may have a creative or reflective focus, or both. However, none of the games fits into one clear-cut category - and most of them use social, physical, creative and reflective/emotional elements, with perhaps one (or more) aspect emphasised over the others. The following are the most common VSL game forms, which are integrated as an essential part of the course design.

- Semi-structured staged games – social activities and various creativity-based games
- Team games – social, movement, and sport activities
- Simulation games - participation in specific role-play, socio drama activities
- Strategic initiative games - clearly defined physical or intellectual task for a team or an individual.
- Musical, dramatic and creative fine arts games
- Psychological/reflective games – some of which may place a higher emotional demand on participants, for example 'solo'

The reflection component, including reviews, so important to experiential education is integrated as part of the dramaturgy. Integrating a range of games involving art, music, drama and adventure activities allows participants to touch different dimensions – physical, social, creative, and reflective/emotional. Traditional outdoor adventure and team building activities are enhanced through other media such as the creative arts and the cultural environment. This more holistic approach involving games and play provides opportunities to enrich programmes internationally, reflecting different unique cultures and style ⁽⁴⁾.

Jaroslav Foglar (1907-1999)

Jaroslav Foglar is recognised in the Czech Republic for his work as an experienced scouting leader, journalist, educator and writer. He led the development and chronicled the history of scouting in Czechoslovakia for over 60 years, specifically summer camps from 1925-1985. Scouting summer camps (*tábory*) still involve children and young adults spending usually two to three weeks living in nature, playing games and learning outdoor skills ⁽³⁾. As a writer, he published many games, and out-of-school educational activities, but he is perhaps best known for his many novels and comic stories. Translations of his books have been published in Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, German and Esperanto; however, these are still unavailable to English-speaking readers.



In 1925 Foglar, aged 18, lead his first scout camp by the river Sázava. Foglar helped create many special features of Czech scouting (*Junák*), particularly through his

writing, which involved a mixture of realism and romanticism, fantasy and adventure, mystery and expeditions into the unknown. He worked as an editor for several magazines and in 1930 he started to cooperate with the scouting magazine *Mladý hlasatel* ('Young Herald'). In 1937 he introduced the concept of 'reading clubs', which later became quite numerous (by 1941 when the Nazi's banned his journal there were 24,600 clubs registered at *Mladý hlasatel* with 21,000 subscribers) . Through his magazine he inspired upto 13,000 young people



each week in addition to the 800 boys in Foglar's scout division (over 60 years). He produced 60 issues of the chronicle for this division (15,000 hand-written pages).

His stories were based upon his long-term work with children on summer camps. His reading club movement was very important for Czech scouting, because it helped to spread these ideas even in the most rural areas of the country, and encouraged independent education through trust. In 1933 his famous boys adventure book *Hoši od Bobří reky* ('Boys from the Beavers' river') was published. For many people the book about the adventures of a group of boys provided inspiration for life long learning. The gang of seven boys learns through a range of activities virtues such as honesty, generosity, shrewdness and strength. In 1938 Foglar also started his most famous cartoon serial *Rychlé šípy* ('Swift Arrows') in the *Mladý Hlasatel* magazine, which every child and adult knows in the Czech Republic. Even though his novels were critically reviewed and his characters described as being out of the social reality, they became bestsellers not only among young people.

It should also be noted that the Czechoslovak communist regime banned the scouting movement post World War II along with the publishing of Foglar's books and *Mladý Hlasatel*. His books were taken away from libraries and could not be sold even in second-hand bookshops. However his fictional work found its way into many Czech homes, and these scouting and adventure traditions were never completely restrained and provided the opportunity to resist the system particularly through realising adventure activities in nature ⁽⁵⁾.

"'Walls have ears, but trees, rivers and mountains do not!' This unifying aspect has contributed throughout Czech history to the development of a unique active and passive involvement with the outdoors, as a way of building self-esteem and attachment to the Czech nation and language, whilst often under the influence of oppressive outside regimes."

With the fall of communism in 1989, Foglar, now over 80, was able to publish again, with a renewal in popularity. However, his health began to fail in 1995 and he died in 1999 aged 92. Foglar remained a bachelor all his life, and had a strong relationship with his mother, with whom he lived until her death aged 102. His father had died when he was very young, and although very poor, it was the friendship and camaraderie of a local scout troupe that provided him with inspiration and possibilities that nature offered. It was his own romantic desire to remain in the world of a boy that engendered him to write stories for the youth. Foglar was committed to active movement and healthy lifestyles with images often linked to bodies, stripped to the waist, permanently on the move and in nature, sunburn as a sign of health, muscles and strength, cigarettes and alcohol were not allowed. Values of good (moral and ethic values) were stimulated along with aesthetic values (beauty) linked to being in nature, and feelings of sharing common values were emphasised, for example friendship and loyalty. These were confirmed by oaths, absolute solidarity, and a certain exclusiveness of the group.

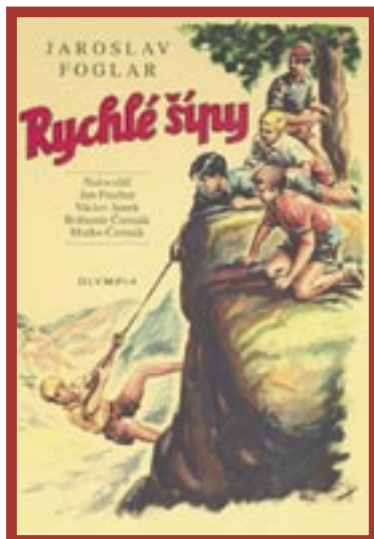
Foglar's educational methods were very progressive, but did not always correspond with traditional scouting, so Foglar often got into trouble with other scout leaders. In pedagogical terms it was the holistic influence of his educational methods and principles that were most important. Tasks were conceived for development of any personality element – from physical development through to the influence on rational abilities, aesthetic feelings, moral responsibility, affects on the will, self-control, concentration, patience, and estimation abilities.



Foglar's tales spoke particularly to the heart of many urban young people who yearned for the kind of adventurous lifestyle that Foglar's stories portrayed.

Using mystery, romanticism, adventures, and challenges linked to symbolism involving reality, fantasy and legend stories, impressively introduced games or activities with educational potential ⁽⁶⁾. In terms of motivation; providing legends, stories or magic can make even a routine banal task into a prestigious event. Through this an everyday life event can turn into poetic romanticism. A simple, perhaps dull, activity requiring physical or mental effort, if wrapped into environment of the life of an American Indian or Wild West becomes immediately an interesting activity⁽⁷⁾.

A game, and it's thrill, become a means of self-knowledge, as it determines the borders of success, leading to learning about the strong and weak sides of one's personality. A game for Foglar was not only a means to fill free time, but it was a huge event. He believed that even the topic of death (for example, in the stories of the murders of some of his fictional characters) can be functional in context. At a young age death is not yet understood as the last irreversible possibility and the end of life. On the other hand it can be understood as a fascinating topic without tragic consequences – as a mystery. By comparison; nowadays the theme of death is often devalued in



action films and in tabloid newspapers, perhaps one of the reasons for some of the brutality witnessed today.

Foglar's work created many traditions, rituals and ceremonies. Rituals and ceremonies were supported by concrete features which recognised achievement. Simple objects incorporated into set rituals became mysterious and interesting, even becoming sacred or taboo, and many activities were marked with points, diplomas, cards, badges. These helped motivate youngsters for other tasks or work, and satisfied the need to be included in a group and excel in it. Some

ceremonies can be also understood as initiation rituals as used in communities such as American Indian or English Scouting.

One of the main contributions that Foglar still offers is that of a role model for young people. A positive role model, 'A youth can hardly be ideal but can easily live with an ideal'.

Conclusion

Jaroslav Foglar documented how experience obtained through games can strengthen and consolidate personality development in an interesting form, without formalism and forcing, but naturally and spontaneously. These educational methods utilising the phenomenon of 'game experience situations' provides a refreshing and broader perspective for creative programming practice in the outdoors, which involves the development of experiential learning involving all the senses. ■

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