



THE NOVA SCOTIA SEA SCHOOL

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

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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 8 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 8 boats up to 28 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, the Sea School's newest instructor, said to students on a trip last summer, 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 8 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.

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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