



## Coyote Meets Trainers

*Coyote is a curious little creature and is fond of wandering around across Europe to meet trainers in the field. Are you interested to get a picture on how your colleagues in the field of training think and feel? Then this is your section.*

Jennifer Nold was born in 1961 in Chicago, USA. Right after obtaining her university degree in American Studies she taught English Literature and Humanities for a few years in a high school. At the same time she participated in a course with Outward Bound and quickly decided to join the organisation as a trainer.

Outward Bound is a sailing term. It is the flag, which is hoisted by the captain when he knows that his ship and crew are ready to leave the safety of the harbour and venture upon the open sea. To be 'Outward Bound' is to be involved in a process of movement, exploration and change.

And that is exactly what Jen did. While working for Outward Bound in the States part-time for eight years, she also spent a year working in New Zealand. Increasing interest in cross-cultural issues then led her to Outward Bound South Africa. Her work there was stimulating and enriching, both professionally and personally: in South Africa she also fell in love with a Belgian Outward Bounder. Since 1993 she has worked and lived in the town of Leuven in Belgium, where she facilitates Outward Bound programmes both for the commercial and the non-profit worlds, with national and international groups.

These days, 'Outward Bound' is primarily recognised as the name of the international organisation specialised in outdoor development training where adventurous activities are used to create opportunities for personal and interpersonal development. Today the organisation is represented in 32 countries around the globe, but it was all started more than 50 years ago by Kurt Hahn, a German educator who fled to England before the war and started up a new educational initiative which later became Outward Bound.

### Interview

#### Coyote:

Apparently Outward Bound is a very powerful tool to bring people together....?

#### Jennifer:

I believe so, and this was why I was interested in working with Outward Bound in South Africa. I think it can be a wonderful way to break down

barriers between people. And yet we need to be careful too. I think that before going to South Africa I viewed typical Outward Bound activities (usually 'outdoor', but not always 'physical' activities) as fairly 'neutral', in the sense of being accessible to all course participants. But I remember very well one of my early eye-openers there.



Jennifer Nold







We were running a programme for young adults (20-25 years old) who had been targeted as having leadership potential. In the group of 25, there were 3 white men and all the rest were black. We presented the group with a raft-building exercise, which they first had to plan indoors before executing their plan outside. 45 painful minutes passed in this indoor discussion, during which time the only three people to say anything were the 3 whites. The 22 blacks sat quietly and respectfully in the room, either watching the whites have their discussion or looking out the window in boredom. Finally after 45 minutes one of the white men got frustrated enough with the situation to say something about it. He addressed one of his black colleagues and said, 'Hey, Widmar, you have a technical background. What don't you make some suggestions about how to build the bloody raft?'. Widmar looked at him and quietly replied, 'What's a raft?'

His reply stopped all of us dead in our tracks. For me, it was a real breakthrough moment. On the surface it was a 'language problem'. But I also came to realise that it was also much more than just a language problem - many South African blacks don't swim and a number of them share various beliefs about evil creatures who live under the water... No wonder they didn't know (or want to know) what a raft was! And instead of offering the group a 'neutral' activity which help bring them together on 'equal footing', we had only managed to reinforce the advantaged and disadvantaged positions with which they had lived their entire lives in South African society!

Since then I've become more sensitive to how our activities are never 'neutral'. It's more than just a South African black and white issue, however. Consider female / male, weak / strong, short / tall, verbal / non-verbal.... Some activities are just more 'accessible' to some people than to others. And I think that's unavoidable. So I guess that part of the art of programme design for me is to incorporate enough 'diversity' in the kinds of activities we do so as to offer all my participants the opportunity to participate as fully as they choose in the programme, to make it possible for them to contribute to the group in their own way...

#### Coyote:

What Zodiac sign would best describe you as a trainer?

#### Jennifer:

Well, I'm a Capricorn myself, which I guess is supposed to mean that I can be quite decisive. I can be that sometimes. But frequently I also feel something else, which maybe 'Gemini' would better describe. Gemini in the sense of flexible. I see myself sometimes being supportive, sometimes confronting and sometimes just going with the flow. And I guess this fits with my view of what I try to do in my programmes. While I usually call myself a 'trainer' I think this name - with its connotation of 'training students in specific skills' doesn't really fit. I prefer the word 'facilitator' because in my perception this label better reflects those issues that are the primary ones for me in my programmes - the *participants'* issues, rather than *my* issues. I don't view myself as a 'teacher', trying to cover a certain amount of material with my 'students' within a set time-frame. Instead, I assume that participants on our Outward Bound programmes are there because they want to learn more about the functioning of their group and themselves - become more aware of what their 'normal' functioning is (again, as a group and / or as individuals) and explore both the richness and potentially the limitations of these behavioural patterns. When the group or individuals bump into situations where their normal behavioural response doesn't 'fit' very well, or doesn't help them generate the outcomes they desire, I help them explore alternative options.

So, it's not really about 'training' participants to be able to do certain things - where a 'Capricornian' approach might be helpful. It's really about helping people become more aware of their own typical behaviour (in a specific context, of course - we work a lot with existing groups: a class, a management team...) and expand their behavioural repertoire, where appropriate and where desired. Crucial in this approach is that we're not telling participants what to do, or when to do it. We try to help them generate their own alternatives, when they are ready and feel the need to do so. It has to remain relevant for them! And this approach seems to require a lot of flexibility - it's impossible to know in advance exactly what issues will be relevant when.

#### Coyote:

But doesn't that make it fairly difficult to design a programme?



**Jennifer:**

Absolutely. But that's just the point. We try to stay very close to the 'here and now' experiences of our participants, as they continually evolve throughout our programmes – this is part of what 'experiential' means for us at Outward Bound Belgium. And working this way can be very powerful, but people's experiences remain unpredictable. That's why we usually design the programme on the spot, as we go, choosing the next activity based on what the important issues from the previous activity were and where the group and individuals feel a need to focus on at that moment. An exciting way of working, focusing on individual and group processes like that. And also sometimes quite tiring and stressful.

**Coyote:**

Isn't it normal that experiences are used as a starting point in experiential learning?

**Jennifer:**

Yes, but I see a lot of 'experiential' trainers / facilitators designing their programmes entirely in advance, and sticking to this programme regardless of the participants' experiences during the programme. I think it can be quite threatening when you drop pre-set structures – I know it was for me when I first started working with Outward Bound Belgium! How do you decide which activity is appropriate at what moment? Sometimes it's possible to answer this question based on a conceptual analysis of group dynamics, for instance, but I think frequently such decisions get made in my stomach rather than my head – a particular exercise just 'feels right' at a certain time... I think this is a way of working that requires a lot of experience – in the beginning you just can't feel / sense / see / intuit that kind of stuff. Sure, some theoretical knowledge is helpful, but experience and being able to 'tune into your group' is even more helpful, I think. You have to be able to feel where the group's at, what they're struggling with, because sometimes they can't make this explicit. And you need to have a feel for the potential effect of a certain activity. And then the art is to combine this feeling you have for the group with this whole range of possible activities which can be presented in an even wider variety of ways, in order to come up with a good activity to help the group at that moment. At one point an exercise might help make a relevant issue more visible for the group or for an individual. At another point, an

exercise might offer them the opportunity to experiment with a different way of working together. And don't get me wrong – sometimes I make the wrong choice too! But I frequently try to involve the group in this choice too – not as far as the specific activity goes, but as far as the theme or issue is concerned – and that frequently helps me be closer to what they need.

**Coyote:**

In what areas would you like to be trained yourself?

**Jennifer:**

Well, for the last 8 years or so, I've been fascinated by cross-cultural learning. I was born in the United States, have travelled quite a bit and have lived and worked in New Zealand, South Africa and now Belgium. And on the one hand, I'm intrigued by cross-cultural *differences* and keep wanting to learn more about them and how to work with them. And yet I am also aware that I hate being categorised as an 'American' and put into that little box. I also belong to lots of other categories (woman, oldest child, Flemish-speaker ...) as well. So I start to get nervous when I read a lot of books and articles about 'Americans (or Japanese or ...) are \_\_\_ and do \_\_\_ and like \_\_\_'. That kind of approach starts to repel me more and more. I wonder how much of that kind of stuff is being written just because there's a good market for it. I think plenty of people are plenty nervous about living or working in another culture and are prepared to spend plenty of money on books and training programmes which will take away some of this fear by telling them what they can expect to find in that other culture. Apparently putting people in little boxes is good business! So while I *can* recognise some general differences, say between Americans and Flemish, and am fascinated by such issues, I'm also repelled by the approach to culture I just described. So it's kind of a love / hate thing...

**Coyote:**

Has Kosovo changed your opinions, feelings, and ideas on what you do?

**Jennifer:**

Umm ... not really. I mean obviously I see the need for people from different cultures to be able to work and live together better. But I believe that this is true *within* a culture too. I ►





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see strong differences between Belgians. More verbal people and less verbal people, for instance. This could also be viewed as an interesting 'cross-cultural' dynamic, except that much of the current cross-cultural literature seems to restrict itself to national cultures. Which is a shame, really. Because I think that the basic idea about appreciating and working with diversity is very important – for all of the groups we work with. And for me I guess it's even more important not to talk about 'culture' or 'diversity' or 'verbal' as general concepts with the groups I work with, but to focus on 'you' and 'me' and how 'we' can come to understand each other and work together better in daily situations.

**Coyote:**

What are you working on at the moment?

**Jennifer:**

In a few days we'll be starting a programme, funded by the Youth for Europe Programme under Action C. All of the European Outward Bound schools will be attending and the aim is to exchange amongst OBS colleagues from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, France and Belgium our different ways of doing Outward Bound. You see, each school has really developed its own identity, depending on its distinctive history and geography. So while our approach is generally fairly similar, there are some significant differences as well. The Czech school, for instance, has a long history of working with drama and art, something which is not very common in most other Outward Bound schools. The Belgian school has the somewhat distinctive approach I've been describing, in part the result of very limited geographical opportunities and a tradition of working with existing groups. And we're all quite different from the 'traditional' Outward Bound model, which consists of long (3-4 week), expedition based programmes.

So this European Staff Training is really very exciting because it's the first time that so many different schools will get together to explore our common and distinctive approaches to running Outward Bound programmes. What a wonderful way to keep learning from each other!

**Coyote:**

What are your dadas?

**Jennifer:**

Oh, hmmm.....Sushi, herbs and spices....

**Coyote:**

And as a trainer?

**Jennifer:**

I know this really simple exercise called 'Find the Tree' which I love because groups can solve it in so many different and creative ways. Even though I've done the exercise with many different groups, I still get surprised by their solutions – great! It really is one of my favourites. But I will not tell you about it. Readers who are curious can ask me for its secret by mail!

**Coyote:**

What are your taboos as a trainer?

**Jennifer:**

That's a hard question. I think taboo is too strong a word. But I do tend to stay away from the *reasons* for why someone behaves the way they do. I mean, whether they had a tyrannical father or were locked in a closet, or whatever. I tend to focus more on the behaviour itself and whether it's working for that person here and now or not.... I'm not a therapist and don't feel the need to be one on my courses.

**Coyote:**

Imagine you could decide what is on the agenda of a European Seminar for Trainers?

**Jennifer:**

I think I'd pick the topic of experiential learning. I think it gets defined in many different ways and it would be interesting to explore that with other experienced trainers. What is it? How does structure play a role? What about the position of the 'trainer'? How can it be integrated with teaching? Etc.

There is a lot more to be said about Outward Bound Belgium and its methodology.

If you are interested, you can contact Jen at:  
[jen@outwardbound.be](mailto:jen@outwardbound.be)

*This interview was conducted by Leen Laconte.*

