

Invited Entry:

Allison, P. (2016). *Kurt Hahn*. Encyclopaedia of Educational thinkers. London: Routledge.

KURT HAHN 1886 – 1974

I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion (www.KurtHahn.org)

Kurt Hahn was born in Germany to Jewish parents and became critical of contemporary education early in his life. Educated in classical philosophy at Berlin, Heidelberg, Freiburg, Göttingen and Oxford he committed his life to education for character formation, learning through experience and citizenship training. Despite studying in various institutions Hahn never completed a degree or education beyond secondary schooling. Most educational thinkers of Hahn's stature leave writings as their legacy but Hahn wrote very little outside of sermons and newspaper articles. Rather he left a legacy of organisations that he either founded or were indirectly inspired by his philosophy.

His early life was complex given the political landscape of early twentieth- century Germany. During the First World War he worked for the German foreign office interpreting the British Press, and he later became the private secretary to Prince Max of Baden (the last imperial chancellor of Germany). In 1920 they co-founded a school in Salem with Hahn as the headmaster. It was here that many of his educational ideas were first implemented and later developed and evolved through various organisations. Salem was run on seven laws which Hahn set out and he believed the value was in their combination:

1. Give children the opportunity for self-discovery
2. Make the children meet with triumph and defeat
3. Give the children the opportunity of self-effacement in the common cause
4. Provide periods of silence
5. Train the imagination
6. Make games important but not predominant
7. Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.

The underpinning philosophies of Hahn largely revolve around the formation of moral character. His beliefs were in response to a landscape of 'decays', which are often referred to as moral declines, which he summarised (Hahn, 1958,p. 4) as:

1. The decay of fitness due to our modern methods of locomotion
2. The decay of self-discipline helped by stimulants and tranquilisers
3. The decay of enterprise due to the widespread disease of *spectatoritis*
4. The decay of skill and care helped by the decline in craftsmanship
5. Above all the decay of compassion which [Archbishop] William Temple called spiritual death.

To combat these declines the organisations he founded all encompassed aspects of inspiring people to realise that "There is more in you than you think" and that "Your disability is your opportunity". More specifically he believed that there were 'four pillars' for meaningful education.

1. Physical fitness
2. Challenging adventures
3. Development of self-reliance through projects
4. Development of compassion through service

These ideas were developed and articulated in the early 1900s yet continue to resonate in some form today, 100 years later. Hahn pedagogical beliefs were also ahead of their time: "It is the sin of the soul to force young people into opinions - indoctrination is of the devil - but it is culpable neglect

not to impel young people into experiences” (Hahn, 1965, p. 3). Indeed, he likened education to midwifery – an analogy that has subsequently gained popularity in some student-centered educational theories.

It is tempting to speculate that some of his philosophy of education was developed as a reaction to the social political landscape in which he lived and worked. During the First World War he held great responsibilities but after the war (in 1932) he spoke out against Hitler by asking Salem alumni to support either Hitler or Salem. As a result, in 1933 he was briefly imprisoned and, with help from his Oxford colleagues, fled Germany to England (five years later he became a naturalised British subject). While these events undoubtedly influenced his moral outlook, his speeches and unpublished writings often credit German humanists such as Goethe and also suggest that Plato’s *Republic* remained an important influence after his time at Oxford.

In 1934 he founded Gordonstoun in Morayshire (Scotland) where, as the headmaster, he introduced many of the ideas he had developed at Salem. The first two students were tasked with building boats which were launched two years later. The use of sailing as a medium for learning is an example of project based learning and a continuation from the use of sailing at Salem. Students at Gordonstoun were also involved in volunteering in the local community – in particular with local coastguard services. Sailing remains an important part of Gordonstoun School to this day.

Hahn was committed to inclusion and when he founded Gordonstoun it was a school for the local community. He introduced scholarships for those who could not afford to study there and developed the Gordonstoun Badge Scheme (1936) which soon changed to be called the Moray Badge scheme as a way of engaging local children in his vision of education. This scheme later morphed into the County Badge Scheme and finally the Duke of Edinburgh Award (1956) and International Award which continue to run today offering experiences with the Hahnian four pillars philosophy (<http://www.dofe.org/go/history/>). Today a staggering 300,000 young people in the UK and 850,000 young people globally in over 140 countries (<http://www.dofe.org/go/stats/>) are involved in these two awards. Over 8 million people have participated in the Awards since it started in 1956 and over 190,000 people currently volunteer to run the Awards globally.

This example of starting a school and then the growth of the badge scheme is an illustration of a theme that runs through Hahn’s work – inclusion and expansion: including people regardless of their ability to pay and expanding to increase opportunities for as many as possible. Both themes were developed further in the 1940s.

Hahn is probably best known for starting Outward Bound (OB). This emerged from the short courses (four weeks) which were based on the four pillars and followed the Badge curriculum. The first OB course was run in 1941 at Aberdovey in Wales. This was a result of collaborations between Hahn and Lawrence Holt who was head of the Blue Funnel Shipping Line – a merchant shipping company. Holt’s concern was that younger seamen did not survive at sea during the war in comparison to older more experienced seamen. Hahn believed that his four pillars and experience of using sailing as a medium for education at Salem and Gordonstoun could remedy this. The history of Outward Bound (OB) is well documented elsewhere but the ongoing influence of OB around the world is impressive. There are now 49 centres in 33 countries around the world working in 250 wilderness and urban environments serving 250,000 participants each year (<http://www.outwardbound.net/about-us/annual-reports/>).

In the early 1940s Hahn continued to seek political influence, becoming part of a wider education reform movement in the UK. The Norwood committee was formed in 1943 to advise the government on educational change. While it is hard to trace specifics, Holt and several of Hahn’s

other associates reputedly gave evidence to the Norwood committee and thus influenced its report (1943), which emphasised character and made specific mention of badge schemes. The 1944 Education Act followed, building on many ideas from the Norwood report. This act arguably remains the most significant educational legislation in the UK to date, and in it, Hahn's influence is unmistakable; it provisioned for local education authorities to offer camps and residential experiences which exemplify the virtues of his philosophy. While Hahn is often seen as an individual pioneer he was politically astute and should be seen as part of a wider movement promoting educational reform. This movement and Hahn's involvement in it also illustrates his commitment to his belief that all young people should have opportunities to undertake what he considered to be engaging and meaningful educational experiences.

The late 1940s saw the opening of schools in Greece, Germany, England, Scotland and USA all following the Salem traditions. In 1953 Hahn retired from Gordonstoun, suffering ill health as a result of sun stroke during a sailing incident in Germany in 1904. Retirement saw Hahn continuing his expansionist aims – the Duke of Edinburgh Award was started three years after leaving Gordonstoun and in 1962, with Sir Lawrence Darvall (commandant of NATO), he founded Atlantic College in Wales. This was to be the first of the United World Colleges (UWCs) and indicates a slight change in philosophy – unfettered by wartime urgency, Hahn shifted his focus to educating young people from different countries and cultural backgrounds to create 'champions of peace'. There are currently UWCs on every continent, 14 in all. National committees operate in 147 countries and more than 1000 students join UWCs every year. Principles of inclusion, diversity and equity remain explicit. Interestingly such principles also appear to be currently influencing some Outward Bound Schools (e.g. Oman).

One of the first students at Gordonstoun was Jocelin Winthrop-Young (who had also studied at Salem), son of Geoffrey who was a famous mountaineer, educator and friend of Hahn. Jocelin was inspired by Hahn and encouraged by him to become the headmaster of Anavryta School in Greece (1949-59) which operated along similar principles to Salem and Gordonstoun. This is where Round Square Schools were conceived but it was not until 1966 (on the seventieth birthday of Hahn) that Jocelin founded Round Square Schools based on six pillars: Internationalism, Democracy, Environment, Adventure, Leadership and Service (IDEALS). There are currently over 100 Round Square Schools which enrol nearly 60,000 students.

Hahn's ongoing impact is hard to overstate. The four organisations outlined above (Outward Bound, Duke of Edinburgh, United World Colleges and Round Square Schools) are the primary legacy of his life and philosophy but there are many others that claim inspiration such as the Sail Training Association (now Sail Training International), National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS in the USA), Project Adventure, and Expeditionary Learning Schools.

Although Hahn's institutions were based in Europe, he left a legacy of organisations which embodied his philosophy around the world.

Hahn's major writings

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Further reading

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