

# The Ultimate Guide to Creating Sustainability Changemakers | by Outdoortopia

Go-to Guide for Creating a New Generation of Changemakers  
Capable of Transitioning Our World to a Sustainable Future



outdoortopia

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## Chapter 1: What is Experiential Education?

*Did you know? Learning by doing can boost knowledge retention by 75% or better.*

### What is Experiential Education?

In a nut shell, experiential education is best defined as "Challenge and experience followed by reflection leading to learning and growth" *Association for Experiential Education*. It's a philosophy and structured methodology of teaching used in a wide variety of disciplines and settings including both indoor and outdoor environments.

Experiential education in the outdoors is just that - learning by doing outside the walls of the classroom.

### Who Is It For?

The tools and techniques of experiential education can be used to engage both youth and adults.

Experiential educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection, in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities.

### Why Educate Experientially?

Put simply, there's a growing body of evidence to show that learning through experience is one of the most engaging and efficient approaches to learn new skills and retain fresh knowledge.

The Hierarchy of Skills (the Theory of Developing Competency) by Igor Kokcharov Ph.D shows:

- Learning through participation (play, exercises, discussion and demonstration) leads to healthy gains in learning retention of between 20% - 75%
- Traditional audio-visual learning results in only <20% retention of learning
- Learning through doing results in an impressive >75% retention of learning

# Chapter 1: What is Experiential Education?

Experiential learners are actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning which helps develop individuals on many levels.

## Who Are Experiential Educators?

Experiential youth educators include classroom teachers, environmental educators, outdoor guides and instructors, camp leaders, therapists, coaches, mental health professionals and many more.

Experiential approaches to learning are used in many disciplines and settings including:

- Nature-based learning
- Adventure and expeditionary learning
- Place-based education
- Project-based education
- Global citizenship education
- Sustainability education
- Student-centered education
- Non-formal education
- Active learning
- Service learning
- Cooperative learning

*"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."*

— - **Confucius**

# Chapter 2: How Can We Create Changemakers?

Changemakers are people who desire change in the world and, by gathering knowledge and resources, make that change happen. We believe every single individual can become a change leader.

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— **- Ashoka.org**

To achieve meaningful change on sustainability issues, it's crucial that the next generation are well-informed of global socio-political and environmental issues and develop well-formed values, based on knowledge and critical thinking. But being informed is only half the answer, as young people also need the confidence and resilience to make real change a reality.

## A New Generation of Changemakers

Stable and durable change is most often a slow process, which requires building upon the steps made previously by others until, as if by magic, what seems impossible today becomes a real possibility tomorrow. This is the path that we must follow, if we as a species are going to adapt and thrive on a planet where overpopulation and sustainable development are key drivers of change.



# Chapter 2: How Can We Create Changemakers?

But how do we as educators ensure that these qualities and attributes become deeply ingrained within the hearts and minds of the next generation of youth? How can we get young people to think "What challenges can I solve with my talents?" or "What can I do to make a difference in my community? rather than simply "What career do I want when I grow up?"

## Technological Change

With the pace of recent advances in technology and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), the jobs of today simply aren't going to be the jobs of tomorrow. As the 21st Century progresses, it's now widely expected by governments, business leaders and technologists that many of the current job creating industries, will become automated by AI in the coming decades. Indeed, [research from the World Economic Forum estimates that 65% of current primary school students will be employed in jobs that don't exist yet.](#)

*It's estimated that 65% of students will be employed in jobs which don't exist yet.*

### — - World Economic Forum

Just like everything involving progress and change, education is absolutely paramount. But not all education is fit for purpose when it comes to creating sustainability changemakers. The uncertainties and challenges of the 21st Century mean that preparing children using the 20th Century model of education is like preparing for the London marathon, only to find out that rather than running, you'll be sailing the English Channel to France!

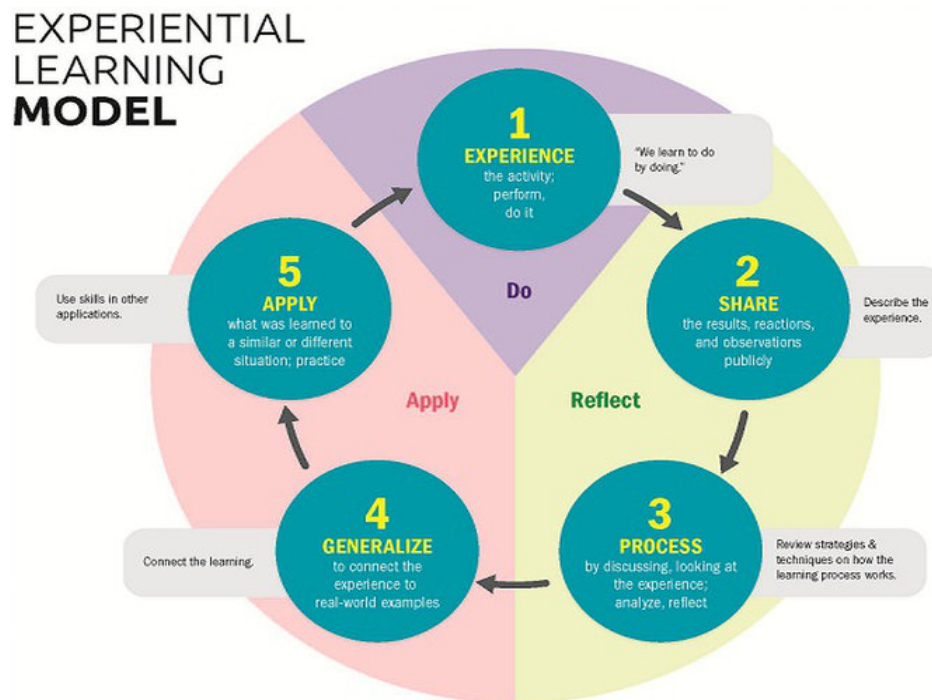
So what can we do to prepare young people for an unknown future in a highly globalized world? Well, thankfully quite a bit!



# Chapter 2: How Can We Create Changemakers?

## The Changemaker Model

At Outdoortopia, we subscribe to The Changemaker Model adapted from the Experiential Learning Model first put forward by Kolb in 1984, and subsequently built upon by Diem (2001) as part of the [National 4-H Experiential Learning Model](#) as shown below:



## The 5 Stages of Sustainability Change

**Stage 1: Experience** - Children need a wide range of opportunities for learning beyond the barriers of the classroom to ensure that they have concrete experience, and that their learning on sustainability issues is connected to the real-world, where things aren't always as simple as they might first appear.

To put this into context, for the next generation to become interested in conserving the wildlife and the environment, it's of vital importance that children spend time in the outdoors experiencing nature first-hand with their senses, so that they develop an appreciation of its value, its beauty and its vast complexity at a young age.

**Stage 2: Share** - Reviewing and reflecting upon the out-of-classroom learning experience is the crucial second step in the change process. This allows the group to assimilate their experiences into what they've learned (new knowledge) and how they felt (connecting with the emotional self), so that together they can start processing how this fits in with their existing knowledge framework and values.

# Chapter 2: How Can We Create Changemakers?

**Stage 3: Process** - After reflecting upon the outside learning experience, the third stage is to draw out conclusions through group discussion based on the new knowledge acquired, and the deeper lessons learned. This requires detailed discussion led by the children and gently facilitated by the educator.

**Stage 4: Generalize** - The fourth stage is to connect the experience to real-world examples and understand how this relates to the global sustainability picture.

To develop changemakers, the best way to broaden the discussion is to introduce or reiterate how the experience and lessons learned relate to sustainability issues using a systems approach. The **Compass Model of Sustainability** is a useful way to break this down and guide discussion, particularly when it's firmly placed within the context of the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**.

## Stage 5: Apply (Take Collective Action)

- Now it's time to apply the lessons and knowledge gained through the initial experience by thoughtfully taking real action, underpinned by the experiential learning process. This could include socially or environmentally-focused action on a personal or collaborative basis and may require the support of community stakeholders, such as community leaders, businesses, NGOs and experiential education providers.

## A Systems Thinking Approach

When it comes down to it, solutions to sustainability challenges require innovation and problem solving using a global systems approach to take action at the community level. By Stage 5 of The Changemaker Model, the children themselves should be much better informed and equipped to develop credible solutions to sustainability issues affecting their own communities.

*"Informed citizens are not necessarily empowered citizens with a change mindset. It's up to us as educators to ensure that this overarching outcome is achieved through The Changemaker Cycle."*



Taking collective action in Stage 5 is designed to encourage young people to take responsibility and demonstrate that real change on sustainability issues is perfectly possible, with an informed approach and well-focused effort. Successful change can gain traction on an individual basis during day-to-day life (e.g. recycling plastic at home, saving water by taking short showers, purchasing locally produced food) or by undertaking collaborative community action to address local needs.

# Chapter 2: How Can We Create Changemakers?

## The Changemaker Mindset

It's important to emphasize that failing to take real action in Stage 5 of The Changemaker Model, risks leading to a sense of disempowerment and an attitude of "How can I possibly have any real impact on global sustainability issues? I'm only one person." That's because informed citizens are not necessarily empowered citizens with a change mindset. It's up to us as educators to ensure that this overarching outcome is achieved through The Changemaker Cycle.

And it doesn't just stop there. Once real action is taken (another new experience), it's back to the beginning of The Changemaker Cycle to share, process, generalize and apply what's been learned.

At Outdoortopia, we believe this is one of the best approaches to empower bright-minded, resilient and confident young changemakers and future leaders, ready for whatever the 21st Century holds!



# Chapter 3: Outdoor Education & the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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Outdoor education has come to mean many things. It can mean anything from adventure-based learning to environmental education, service learning in the local community or visiting a local museum. Essentially, when I refer to outdoor education, I'm including any learning which takes place outside of a classroom setting.

**The UN Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action with the aim of achieving 17 extraordinary global objectives by 2030.**

This chapter is all about the role that outdoor education for young people can play in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

### What Are the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

#### THE GLOBAL GOALS For Sustainable Development



# Chapter 3: Outdoor Education & the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations (UN) has outlined the path to global sustainability by breaking down the complexity of the challenge into smaller pieces in a framework for sustainable development, known as the "[Sustainable Development Goals](#) (or SDGs)." There are 17 clearly defined and well-constructed SDGs, which cover just about every jigsaw piece for achieving global sustainability, including poverty alleviation, responsible consumption, ensuring access to quality education, reducing inequalities, taking action on climate change and many more. Check out the infographic below for the complete list of goals from the UN.

While each individual goal might seem like a giant task in its own right, fortunately there is good reason to be optimistic. In the year 2000, for instance, the international community committed to cutting extreme poverty in half and, by the year 2015, that goal was met.

This is a perfect demonstration of what can be achieved if individuals, communities and nations unite together in action for positive change on sustainability issues. We cannot do this alone. We can only do this with international cooperation and it must be on a scale never seen before in human history.

## The Future's Bright with Sustainability Education

One thing's for certain. If today's youth don't get behind sustainability and take informed action, we have little possibility of ever achieving a sustainable future through the SDGs or any other global targets. Young people are the future and we must make every effort to get them involved in taking action on the SDGs, informing them through sustainability education, and exploring how they can be part of the solution.

I believe there's now big change on the horizon. I can see it and I can feel it. I talk to young people everyday as an outdoor educator. Generation Z (anyone born in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s) seem to want something different to previous generations. For many of today's youth, it's less about fame and fortune, and more about having impact and creating change.



# Chapter 3: Outdoor Education & the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The fresh shoots of young and energetic **social enterprises and initiatives** are rapidly sprouting, led by talented people who are united by passion to make our planet a better place. I'm inspired by today's youth and many of the positive steps forward that I'm seeing in schools too. But classroom teachers sometimes point out that I only see the positive empowerment of young people in outdoor and experiential education and sometimes remark that little has changed in their view.

But I'm pleased to say with confidence - it's not true - in my experience many young people these days want more, much more. I'm seeing a craving for meaning in their lives that transcends the ordinary. Rather than "What career do I want when I grow up?" some are beginning to ask "How can I use my talents to help solve global sustainability challenges, like climate change?" So let's inspire and encourage them to do just that, and tackle sustainable development issues head-on through the power of education!

## The Destruction of Our Planet

It's a sad fact that today's youth are forced to inherit a sick planet. Earth is becoming increasingly polluted - one **recent study** found that 90% of seabirds now have plastic in their guts. Many scientists have confirmed that we are in the midst of **a global anthropogenic mass extinction event** bigger and faster than any in known geological history. In 50 years, we've lost approximately 60% of our planet's wildlife and it's taking place right under our noses. Climate change threatens the very fabric of human civilization and could either tear us apart, or bring us together like never before.

The challenges we face are undeniably enormous and, as a scientist by training, I can assure you, I'm not overstating the destruction of our planet. It's real and it's happening right now.

But there's no time for blame games. Sustainability is the key to our survival as a species and we all must take active responsibility. Young people embrace globalization and the spreading of ideas and world cultures like no other generation before them. Most know that climate change and sustainable development are the biggest issues humanity has ever faced. So as educators, we have a truly vital role to play.

We have the power to equip the next generation to become informed changemakers who take action, and are so inspired to create a sustainable future that they become the "*Green Generation*" that changes our world beyond all recognition for a far brighter future!

# Chapter 4: Educate Not Advocate: The Key to Sustainability

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According to [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com), the verb "to advocate" means "to speak or write in favor of, support or urge by argument; to recommend publicly." In other words, an advocate is a person who speaks or writes in support of a cause. But importantly, there's a big distinction between advocacy and education, and this is something I feel the need to address in this blog post.

### The Age of Alternative Facts

In our digital age of Twitter feeds, "fake news" and information overload, it's now more important than ever to ensure the next generation are able to discern between the credible and the uncredible, decode the agendas of organizations and institutions, such as news outlets, political parties, governments and powerful corporations, and think independently as bright-minded, responsible and global-minded citizens.



# Chapter 4: Educate Not Advocate: The Key to Sustainability

## Crossing the Line

As educators, it can be surprisingly easy to cross the narrow line between education and advocacy, by imposing our own views and opinions on our students and, as you'll soon see, this is something we must be careful of as responsible educators. Most educationists would agree that the cornerstone of a quality education is one that challenges individuals to grow and develop skills and values based, not on predetermined answers, but on knowledge and critical understanding to make sense of the world we live in.

## Global Citizenship

As such, we must be mindful of advocacy when teaching, so that we allow our students the space and freedom to develop their own views and feelings based on critical thinking and reflection, particularly in relation to complex issues relating to **sustainability**. That's because scientific literacy and understanding are essential for educating the next generation to make good, evidence-based choices both now and in the future, as they grow into responsible citizens in a rapidly changing, globalized world.

In other words, as educators we don't need to know all the answers, but we do need to know the right questions to ask in order to guide our students successfully through the learning process.

*"I believe sustainability education is... a delicate balancing act... [in which] practitioners must have a solid foundation in both the scientific and socio-political sides of the coin..."*

I believe that if we can inspire a love of learning within our students, make learning relevant, meaningful and authentic, and develop important 21st Century skills, we can trust that the young people we teach will grow into informed global citizens, able to think critically and carefully and identify "fake news" and "alternative facts" at the source.

## Educate Not Advocate!

Many of us who are practitioners of sustainability education, or a similar discipline, hold well-informed views regarding environmental and social justice issues. And that's a great thing. But we must not allow our socio-political views to inform the way we teach.

# Chapter 4: Educate Not Advocate: The Key to Sustainability

## The Power of Education

I've seen impassioned and well-meaning sustainability educators fall into the advocacy trap, or make scientifically unfounded statements to support their views. Indeed, I too have been guilty of falling into the advocacy trap in the past, which is what drove me to write this post in the first place! It's also why I believe sustainability education is such a delicate balancing act, and why practitioners must have a solid foundation in both the scientific and socio-political sides of the coin, to effectively facilitate sustainability education.

*"It's now more important than ever to ensure the next generation are able to discern between the credible and the incredible, decode the agendas of organizations and institutions... and think independently as bright-minded, responsible and global-minded citizens."*

It's easy to cross the line into advocacy without being overtly aware, as our own views and well-meaning biases can easily be passed on unquestioned. That's why 21st Century education is a real art form, which requires children to take a lead in the learning process.



## Chapter 4: Educate Not Advocate: The Key to Sustainability

Additionally, it's also why education for sustainable development and global citizenship must be carefully and skillfully facilitated by trained and qualified youth educators, and why I believe this approach to learning should be at the forefront of 21st Century education globally.

As teachers and educators, we have one almighty responsibility - we're charged with changing the collective consciousness of young people to address some of the biggest issues of our time, namely sustainability and climate change. The stakes are high and we have just a few short years to build a sustainable future through the transformative power of education!

## Chapter 5: Community Mapping: What's Affecting Your Neighborhood?

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In **service learning**, students learn to tackle real-world problems in their community, while building deeper understanding and skills for themselves.



I've seen first-hand what service learning can do to help the local community, while also providing valuable learning experiences for young people. The best thing is - it can be a real win, win. By both empowering youngsters to make positive real-world change (e.g. tree planting, building community facilities in under resourced countries, sourcing materials and planting a vegetable garden at a homeless refuge) while, at the same time, encouraging face-to-face interaction between young people, committed volunteers, community organizations and local businesses; there's incredible potential for valuable learning to take place, in a way that classroom-based learning simply could never match!



# Chapter 5: Community Mapping: What's Affecting Your Neighborhood?

## Engaging Young People in Local Sustainability Issues

But how can we go about getting children engaged in sustainability issues facing their community? Well, we could encourage students to go around the neighborhood canvassing for opportunities to help local charities and organizations for service learning. However, that would be time consuming and probably not beneficial to the learning process.

Or we could hire a 'gap year' company to organize community work for us in a developing country. But the downside to this is, it would be costly and commercial service learning experiences have the tendency to feel rather contrived, sometimes leaving you wondering whether you made any *real* difference to the community you were working in.




## Community Mapping: Compass of Sustainability


Or alternatively, you could start by looking in your own backyard (so to speak), through a process known as Community Mapping! This is a really useful hands-on precursor designed to give students a good feel of the sustainability challenges their neighborhood is facing, and get them to think about any collective action they could take to give back to their community. It relies on a mixture of kinesthetic learning, class discussion, brainstorming, mapping and action planning, to really get to the heart of local sustainability issues.


# Chapter 5: Community Mapping: What's Affecting Your Neighborhood?

A brilliant framework to use for Community Mapping (and any sustainability-based educational activity for that matter) is the [Compass of Sustainability](#); a smart tool for breaking down complex sustainability issues into bite-sized pieces using **Nature**, **Economy**, **Society** and **Wellbeing** (**N**orth-**E**ast-**S**outh-**W**est) as the axes of investigation as outlined below:

Compass of Sustainability - A Smart Tool Developed by AtKisson Group to Understand Complex Sustainability Issues

 **N is for Nature** – All of our natural ecological systems and environmental concerns, from ecosystem health and nature conservation, to resource use and waste

 **E is for Economy** – The human systems that convert nature's resources into food, shelter, ideas, technologies, industries, services, money and jobs

 **S is for Society** – The institutions, organisations, cultures, norms, and social conditions that make up our collective life as human beings

 **W is for Wellbeing** – Our individual health, happiness, and quality of life

In preparation for Community Mapping, it's really important that you get your class to spend time brainstorming a list of possible indicators that they might expect to encounter as symptoms of a larger sustainability challenge beforehand. Break the group down into smaller subgroups, and ask each team to brainstorm using the following key questions as a guide:

- ✓ What should you be looking out for (e.g. run-down housing, soup kitchens, excess litter, foul smelling river water and so on...)?
- ✓ What do you see, read or hear about in the news?
- ✓ Do your parents discuss any neighborhood issues at the dinner table?

## Community Walk: A Simple Guide

Community Mapping is easy to organize and it only takes around 60 minutes to complete - all you require are a few craft supplies for making a map, notebooks and writing implements (plus a camera as an optional extra). So, without further adu, it's now time to lace up your boots and go exploring!

Get your students to walk around the neighborhood in small subgroups, while actively making their own maps. Depending on the learning objectives, the study area and class size, you might consider assigning local issue topics to different teams, so they each have a specific focus (e.g. **Nature**, **Economy**, **Society** or **Wellbeing**).

# Chapter 5: Community Mapping: What's Affecting Your Neighborhood?

While on the walk, take time to pause and ask students for observations and allow time for note-taking. The point of the community walk is to look for symptoms of problems that are usually ignored, so take enough time for a thorough survey. It's also a good idea to take sketches and photographs of important indicators (making sure to be respectful and ask for permission, if necessary). Speaking to local people and conducting questionnaires can give you some great insights too.

## Back in the Classroom

Upon return, facilitate a class discussion. Ask students:

1. What was your reaction to seeing the issue? Surprised? Upset? Angry? Confused?
2. What issue(s) do you think this was a sign of?
3. What community programs are in place to tackle this issue?
4. What actions could we take to help?

Now ask the students to draw a community map on A3 paper. Most urban maps contain roads, highways, waterways, parks and buildings, but this map will also tell a story of what life is like living and working in the community. Adding field sketches / photographs and newspaper clippings can also be a useful addition.

Make sure students include:

**Community assets** - The places that add value to the community, such as libraries, government offices, community centers, religious buildings, schools, public gardens, playgrounds and even a wall mural that brighten's up the community.

**Individual assets** - Skills and talents held by community members (including the students themselves) such as public speaking, musical talents, drawing skills or event organization.

## A Vote of Change

You should now be left with a concise and easy-to-understand list of local sustainability issues, backed up by real-world evidence collected by the students themselves. Now it's time to take a vote from the list for action planning.

Ask students to vote on the local problem they feel most passionate about. Select one topic that will allow the class to work together towards maximizing the impact. If there's more than one topic, allow students to form groups - it's vital that they are passionate about the issue, so they feel strongly invested in the outcomes.

# Chapter 5: Community Mapping: What's Affecting Your Neighborhood?

Now refer back to the maps. Get the students to analyze which community assets match the issue they selected. For example, if the issue was homelessness, students might want to identify local soup kitchens or homeless shelters and connect with people that may already be making a difference.

## Share the Results

Now it's time to share and gather the findings of the group investigation together. A great way to do this is to ask each mapping team to present to the rest of the class, using their community map to highlight their key findings.

Run a brainstorming session and create a single list of connecting themes and emerging community issues, creating a summary of the main similarities and differences of the maps.

## A Plan of Action

Once the issue and community assets have been identified, get the students to form a detailed action plan. For example, if the class is interested in improving the environment, organize a litter clean-up day in the local park or nearest beach.

**The Most Important Thing Is: Make Sustainability Action Reality!**



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**We Help Create Changemakers Beyond the Classroom.**

Contact us at [hello@outdoortopia.org](mailto:hello@outdoortopia.org)

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