

Educators on the Challenge Course

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Challenge course practitioners. According to current ACCT standards this is the classification for those of us who use a challenge course as a tool for group and individual development. As practitioners in the field, are we educators? The answer will depend on factors like our clients' objectives, program philosophy, and/or one's personal approach to challenge course programming. Specifically, when it comes to a personal approach I have worked with two different types of practitioners over the last 20 years – the recreational and the educational. Please understand as you read on, neither type is any better than the other. It simply depends on the desired purpose and intended outcome(s) of any one program.

Recreational challenge course practitioners spend no time reflecting on clients' behaviors, interactions, and learnings of their programmed experiential activities. For example, they provide adventures for clients like climbing programs, adventure races, and amusement park events without reflection. The educational practitioner will spend time with his or her group looking back on their adventures. Ultimately (and hopefully) helping them to discover useful behaviors that are transferable to other areas of their lives.

Historically, educational practitioners working with a challenge course and ground-level games and initiatives consider themselves to be facilitators. But this is only part of the educational picture. As educational practitioners it is important to know that being a facilitator is only one of three possible roles we can assume in connection with our clients' learning.

Most of us have come to understand that in the field of experiential education, facilitation is an integral part of its success and effectiveness. It is part of the experiential philosophy. Through adventurous activities, a purposeful facilitator can guide clients towards and encourage exploration of interpersonal and intrapersonal change.¹ Christine Hogan supports this perspective by noting that, “[f]acilitation is concerned with encouraging open dialogue among individuals with different perspectives so that diverse assumptions and options may be explored.”² Facilitators use “real time” experiences (those that just occurred) for such explorations. Put another way, experiential facilitators provide social experiences, in the form of adventurous activities, to help bring to the surface the ways in which individuals interact with each other. These interactions are then reflected upon, or talked about, in order to determine if any changes need to be (or want to be) implemented. As educational practitioners we facilitate “social education,” being different from, but closely related to “academic education.” Karl Rohnke and Steve Butler tell us that we get to teach “the basics of communication, cooperation and trust in a milieu of FUN.”³

But facilitation is only one aspect of a typology of educational roles we can choose as a challenge course practitioner. Once these roles are understood we can see that we move through a balance of being an instructor, a teacher, or a

facilitator depending on the demands of the educational experience. The following is a simple fundraising adventure scenario to compare and contrast these three educational roles.

The 58 eighth graders of The Good Shepherd Middle School have concluded their “Million Penny” fundraising efforts and want to know how many pennies they actually collected – a problem-solving opportunity.

The Instructor: “Eighth graders, looking at the list posted on the wall you will find your name among a small group of your peers. Please get into those groups now.....We are going to place all the pennies we collected in the center of the gym. Each small group will find a place in the gym for their own counting area. The oldest person in your group will bring pennies from the center of the gym to your group’s counting area. The rest of your group will create stacks of 10 pennies. After all the pennies have been stacked we will hand out paper penny rolls. As a group you will then place 50 pennies into each roll. If you have less than 50 pennies at the end of your rolling, bring them to the center of the gym. Once all the pennies are rolled your group must add the total amount of money you have and write this amount under your group on the list on the wall – we’ll find some people to help us roll the remaining pennies in the center of the gym. Once all the numbers are in I will add them up for our grand total.”

The Teacher: “Eighth graders, congratulations on your efforts, we are all very proud of you! Now we need to count them up to see how we did. Please get into groups of 4 or 5 people so you can coordinate your efforts.....now send us over one person from your group to help us get all the pennies we have to the center of the gym...Okay, in the past we have seen the students make stacks of 10 pennies so they are easy to count. Others have gone ahead and just counted out 50 pennies and put them in a penny role right away. If you want to be very sure of our count, we could use these small cups as well. Each group can work on putting 50 pennies in each cup, then we could rotate groups so one group can check the work of another group – just in case, because there are a lot of pennies here and we want to make sure we have an accurate count. Whatever method we choose, your group will want to write down, on a slip of paper that we have here, how much you have counted. Then, we will use this flip chart paper to add it up together. So, what do you think we should do? Does anyone have any other ideas?”

The Facilitator: “Eighth graders, let’s all gather together and have a seat. So, you have finished your penny drive, congratulations. Overall, how do you think it went? What were some of the challenges you encountered? How did you work them out? Do you think you made your million? Well, it’s time to find out. Your objective at this point is to count them up. Take some time now, let’s say not more than 10 minutes, to plan how you are going to count up the pennies and come up with the total amount of money you made. Before you start your counting, please have someone explain to us what your plan is going to be. Keep

in mind, you will want an exact count, so we don't get in trouble with the bank, and you will want the money packaged in a way so you can get it to the bank and make your deposit. Also, your parents are due to arrive at 6 o'clock, so your time is limited. Are there any questions at this point? Again, before you start counting, we want to be informed of your plan.

If this scenario has been set up experientially and the educator takes on the role of facilitator, he or she would also take the time to reflect or process the task once it is completed. How did your planning go? Did you come up with a plan that everyone agreed to? How do you know? Did anyone find they had to change the plan? Why? What were some of the challenges you encountered while counting? What were some of the ways you solved these challenges? How did you work as a team? Together? Independently? What feelings arose during the counting? Frustration? Excitement? How did these feelings affect your task? Were you successful? What did you learn from this group task that will be important for you to remember? What advice would you give the next group of counters?

The instructor and teacher roles described above would not take any time afterwards to discuss the task. They would typically move on to what comes next in their plan, whatever that might be. However, could an educator who instructed the group through a task take some time to talk about the task? Yes, of course. He or she would then move into the role of facilitator. Could a teacher do the same thing? Of course. So, an educator's role is not cut and dry (unfortunately many educators think it is). Roles can change in relation to the context of the educational experience and the intended outcomes.

But wait! What about a "leader?" The one "up in front" or "in charge" is often seen as a leader. Are they not educators? A number of publications in the adventure education field refer to the experiential educator as a leader.⁴ As one example, Rohnke and Butler, in their book *Quicksilver* tell us the "leader" facilitates the process and "the leader/facilitator doesn't provide all the answers to the group; primarily the participants learn from each other" (see note 3). So, there are some who consider the one(s) responsible for/to the group to be the leader(s). However, this can be misleading.

Peter Senge, writing during a wave of change around leadership, believed that the "new...leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers...they are responsible for learning."⁵ Since we can easily say that all educators are responsible for learning then the leader is surely an educator. However, if you were to dig into the plethora of leadership books⁶ available to us there is one key difference in the position of the leader – he or she is a part of the group being lead. The leader is part of the goals and objectives of the group, shares in success and rewards of the group's accomplishments. Is, in fact, affected by his or her own leadership. So, yes, a leader is an educator, but will choose between the roles of instructor, teacher, and facilitator as he or she leads those willing to follow.

As trainers of challenge course practitioners and as reflective practitioners⁷ in the field, it is important to know how we can “educate” in relation to the context of an educational situation. We can instruct, we can teach, or we can facilitate. From a traditional experiential mindset we often take on the role of the facilitator. We provide our clients with educative experiences in order for them to learn from these experiences and each other. But are we always, or should we always be, facilitating? We must consider situations that call for other educational roles. Just like programming appropriate activities for particular objectives and projected outcomes, we, as challenge course practitioners, can also choose the appropriate educational role to go along with an activity depending on the needs of our clients and the context of the experience.

¹ For a look at some of the philosophical foundations of adventure-based programming, see Miles & Priest’s (1999) *Adventure Programming* and Nadler & Luckner’s (1992) *Processing the adventure experience: Theory and practice*. Another great foundational text, if you can find a copy, is *Adventure Education* (1990) by Miles & Priest, Venture Publishing. ISBN: 0-910251-39-8.

² The quote is found on p. 10 of Hogan’s book, *Understanding facilitation: Theory & principles*. Even though Hogan’s book does not deal specifically with adventure facilitation, she provides a concise perspective on the historical roots of facilitation and where it is utilized.

³ Rohnke, K. & Butler, S. (1995). *Quicksilver: Adventure games, initiative problems, trust activities and a guide to effective leadership*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt. This book is one of our adventure-based favorites. It includes a plethora of great activities supported by noteworthy theoretical content (academically speaking).

⁴ Specifically Rohnke & Butler’s book in Note 3 above and Priest & Gass’ “Effective leadership in adventure programming.”

⁵ Senge, P. M. (1990), *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency. The quote is found on page 340.

⁶ Some of the more prevalent authors on leadership include John C. Maxwell, Kouzes & Posner, Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, and Linda Lambert. And, if you take the journey, don’t forget to look at James Burns’ seminal work “Leadership.”

⁷ Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.