
AN INTRODUCTION TO ROPES COURSE AND TEAM CHALLENGE PROGRAMS

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Ropes courses are becoming a popular form of experiential education in American society today. In the last several years, ropes courses have been built on university campuses, at churches and at camps. Corporate America is also becoming more involved with experiential education on ropes courses and programs are being offered for businesses in most regions of the country. This is usually under the heading of Outdoor Experiential-Based Training and Development. The potential for staff and student development through the use of ropes course training should not be ignored by campus recreation administrators.

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Ropes courses provide an environment in which leadership skills, communication, team building and group dynamics can be developed. The method in which these skills are fostered is through experiential education, or learning by doing. Ropes courses are set up for groups to solve problems and work together to complete tasks. The method in which they complete the task and how they use their leadership, communication and trust skills leads to better teamwork and

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appreciation among all members of the team.

"The mission of the Ropes Course/Team Challenge is to provide exciting experiential opportunities that focus on leadership, team building, personal growth, problem solving, communication skills, and self-esteem" (CSUS Campus Recreation Guide, 1994). Ropes courses provide an environment for people to learn and grow both individually and as a team. During a ropes course, participants are put in "optimal arousing situations (via various individual and/or team initiatives, some of which are described later in this article) and (are encouraged to) successfully respond to challenges" (Ewert, 1989, p. 88). These challenges must meet the competence levels of the individual's abilities for "flow" to occur during an activity. Ropes course facilitators try to have the participants reach a "flow" experience during the course, which means participants' abilities match their challenges. According to "A Professional Partnership with Outward Bound" (Outward Bound Brochure, 1995), the success on a ropes course "depends on a delicate blend of skills and character: a taste for challenge, tenacity in problem solving, and the ability to work with others."

Experiential Education

The intent of experiential education is "to create a just and compassionate world by transforming education and promoting positive social change" (Association of Experiential Education Handbook, 1995). This social change can be in several forms, such as getting to know people with different backgrounds, encouraging people to work together as a team or building communication between group members.

Experiential education provides a learning environment that strives to make use of all five senses. In today's society the average person rarely takes

time to learn through their five senses. Computers provide people with a form of experiential education, but they are inanimate objects. Computers only require the sense of sight to view a computer screen; the other senses do not typically come into play with this educational tool. Experiential education on a ropes course provides an opportunity for people to touch, see, smell and hear while they learn. This is what true experiential education is all about.

Freeberg and Taylor (1963, p. 3) write about several educational characteristics that describe experiential education. These characteristics have been shown to be associated with effective student learning. Most of the ten items relate directly to experiential education. They are:

1. Education is a social process.
2. Experience is the best teacher.
3. Humans learn to do by doing.
4. Learning is best when information is obtained through all the senses.
5. The mind proceeds from the known to the unknown, from the particular to the general, and from the concrete to the abstract.
6. Education is growth.
7. Knowledge should be acquired through experience and the written word, not merely through the written word.
8. It is difficult to teach a person but possible to help him/her learn.
9. A skilled teacher must know "what" to teach as well as "how" to teach.
10. The "what" and the "how" are inseparable counterparts for good teaching.

One item is no more important than another because the learning process is affected by all aspects of the teacher-learner situation. Becoming a successful teacher requires the use of sound educational methods and techniques as a means of challenging, motivating and imparting knowledge to students.

Types of Experiential Education

There are several ways that learning can be accomplished using experiential education. Internships, entry-level positions in an area of interest, are recognized as a very positive way for students to learn by experience. For example, if a student wants to become a camp director after finishing their degree, then a positive internship experience would be to assist a camp director in his or her daily schedule. For an internship to be successful, the student's goals should be clearly established. These goals may include such things as rigor, appropriateness and balance (Jacobs & Allen, 1982, p. 22).

Another form of experiential education may be a class field trip, going outside of the normal class room setting to gain knowledge. For example, if a biology class is studying insects, then it may be beneficial for the class to go out to a field and look for insects. By looking at the insects in their natural environment, several observations may be made and the learning process continues for these students. Rillo (1985) says that "learning by discovery leads students to develop concepts from concrete experiences" (p. 9).

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Outdoor programs also offer education which is conducted experientially. "Outdoor Education is education *in, about, and for* the outdoors" (Hammerman & Hammerman, 1973, p. 7). Outdoor programs take people into the natural environment for a period of time to provide the opportunity to learn and experience new things. In this way, the outdoors is used as a tool to teach others about the environment, about important skills and about themselves. One organization offering a form of outdoor experiential education is the Wilderness Education Association (1995). Their month long course is based on student participation and having them work on decision-making, judg-

ment and leadership skills while in the wilderness environment. There are several other programs which offer similar experiences, such as the National Outdoor Leadership School, Outward Bound, or programs at outdoor education centers on university campuses. Ropes courses provide another very rich form of experiential education. One type of outdoor education program gaining popularity is the ropes course.

Ropes Courses

Ropes course experiences focus on leadership, personal growth, problem-solving, communication skills, team building and self-esteem. Ropes courses provide an environment for people to learn and grow individually and as a team. Teamwork is an integral part of our lives. It manifests itself in our work settings, at home and with friends. Ropes courses are being built across the country as a way for groups to learn more about each other. Many universities, churches and camps recognize the potential of ropes courses for a variety of student groups and administrative units.

During a ropes course, participants are seeking out "optimal arousing situations and strive to successfully respond to challenges" (Ewert, 1989, p. 88). These challenges must meet the competence levels of the individuals abilities for "flow" to occur during an activity. Ropes course facilitators try to have the participants reach a "flow" experience during the course, which means the participants' abilities will match their challenges.

To understand the experiential education benefits of a ropes course, it is useful to describe a "typical" ropes course experience. Ropes courses are usually held outside and put together with a variety of elements spread out over a space of ground. An element, or initiative, is a task which involves group interaction and involvement. Wood pieces, cinder blocks, trees, cables, buckets, cans, ropes and other materials may be used to create the elements. Ropes courses can have low and/or high elements in which the members of the group work together to solve and complete tasks set up by the ropes course coordinator. The ropes course

coordinator is usually someone who meets qualifications set by a nationally recognized program, such as Project Adventure or Adventure Based Experiential Education (ABEE). Low elements typically focus on problem solving, communication and teamwork. High elements also promote team objectives, but tend to be more individually based to help build confidence and push people to their limits via "risk" activities or challenges. "Risk activities can provide opportunities for the development of a positive self concept by helping participants discover their capabilities, how much they can take, and what they can do" (Meier, Morash & Welton, 1980, p. 117).

Safety is a critically important issue in designing and administering a ropes course program. Every low element is "spotted" and if participants are above the ground, safety helmets, harnesses and ropes are used with a belay system. Spotting is done by the group always being aware of the individual being lifted and being prepared to catch the individual if they should fall. A belay system is a rope fastened to an individual using a climbing harness. The rope attaches over a participants head, along a safety cable and then back to the belayer. The belayer is the person on the ground who controls the slack in the rope and "holds" the individual if they should fall. The rope is also fastened to the belayer using a friction device and carabiner attached to a harness. A friction device allows for a series of bends in the rope which results in friction, which in turn provides a mechanical advantage. A carabiner can be aluminum or steel and is constructed with a clip which connects two or more points together. The safety measures and equipment are designed to eliminate accidents and allow the participant to focus on overcoming the perceived risks of the activity.

Ropes courses are challenging to operate. The initial costs of building a ropes course are high, but once the course is operating, it can be self-supporting and even profitable. Some of the initial expenses include outlays for the land, materials, permits, builders, training, equipment and maintenance. Training can be provided through a

number of different organizations, including ABEE, Cradlerock and Project Adventure. Facilitators can be trained by working on a ropes course. The course can become nationally certified by following certain safety, building and operating standards set by The Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT). Liability is a concern with ropes courses, but as long as proper safety is used on the course and "assumption of risk" forms are used, the course should be able to operate safely and effectively.

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After elements are completed on ropes courses, a "debriefing" and "processing" period occurs with participants. Debriefing is when the facts are revisited and observations are shared. Processing is the search for the meaning in the debriefing session. This is usually facilitated by the ropes course coordinator who encourages participants to communicate their thoughts, frustrations and feelings about how the group tackled the problem (Meier, Morash & Welton, 1980, p. 121). The lessons the participants learned from the activity are discussed. The participants are then asked to find a practical application of the awarenesses to use in their everyday lives. An example of this process may be that a group must cross from one square block to another on the ground. They have two boards to get across, but neither board will fit across the two squares alone. They must figure out how to make a bridge using both boards to get from one square block to the other as a group. In debriefing this element, a group might realize that supporting each other was important as one person placed the boards across to make a bridge. They might then be asked how this can be used in the real world, or how they apply the skills learned through the activity. The participants might respond that it helps to support

each other when a task is being completed, so the task will be successfully achieved.

Benefits Derived From a Ropes Course

The major benefits associated with participating on a ropes course include team building, communication, leadership and group dynamics. The initiatives and challenges of a ropes course are set up to foster these benefits. An example of an initiative is a spider web. To complete this task, the group must get from one side of the webbing to the other side, but only one person can go through a hole, and then the hole becomes unusable. This problem takes teamwork, communication, leadership and group interaction to be completed successfully.

Team building is one of the key benefits of a ropes course experience. Team building occurs when a group works together to solve a common problem. Ropes courses are designed to help groups function and work more effectively and efficiently together. The Penn State Outing Club states its number one goal for their challenge course at Roaring Run is to "increase the level of mutual support and teamwork within the group" (Penn State Outing Club Challenge Course, 1995, p. 1). Teamwork is the key phrase used by courses across the country.

Teamwork encourages a group to "develop an identification as 'members,' a sense of purpose, a pattern of interaction, and some commonly agreed-upon system of order" (Ford & Blanchard, 1993, p. 184). Initiatives cannot be solved individually, therefore the group needs to work together to solve the initiatives.

Communication is shared meaning or "any information-sharing activity" (Russell, 1986, p. 205). Communication is imperative on a ropes course and is critical to this form of experiential education. It may consist of either verbal or non-verbal communication. As long as the participants are communicating with each other and/or the coordinator, the tasks can be completed. Verbal communication allows people to express themselves vocally. An example of the importance of verbal communi-

cation can be illustrated through one of the initiatives of the ropes course, "the blind square." A small group is blindfolded and given a long piece of rope. By verbally communicating, they must get the rope into a perfect square. Some groups will be very effective at completing this task, while others will not; it depends on how they verbally communicate.

Ropes courses are designed to help groups function and work more effectively and efficiently together.

Non-verbal communication is also present on ropes courses. The participants deal with proxemics (distance from each other), kinetics (movement, posture, gestures), chronemics (time - how long or short a task takes to be completed), haptics (touch), and artifacts (what each participant looks like and is wearing). An example of a non-verbal communication activity is having a group line up on a log according to their birth date. The group must do this without talking. They must then move on the log without touching the ground, to get in correct order of oldest to youngest. They must find a way to communicate who is the oldest down to the youngest. Once they have figured this out, they must deal with the proxemics of the log, the kinetics of each individual on the log, the chronemics, if the coordinator chooses to time the group, and the haptics of being together on a small log. An example of artifacts being used during non-verbal communication is when a group does not know each other and they see the physical appearance of the individual and judge them without getting to know them first.

"Leadership is a skill of facilitating goal achievement in the individual or group with whom one is working" (Corbin & Williams, 1987, p. 1). On ropes courses, one individual usually takes the initiative to become the leader to get the task completed. This person can take on a leadership role by either

emerging among the group as a leader, or the person will have charisma and the group will look up to the individual. Ford and Blanchard (1993, p. 190) also write about leaders who are selected by appointment or election. These do not seem to be the case on ropes courses. "An emergent leader is one who, while not initially chosen, emerges from the group to assume leadership roles when the 'right' situation occurs. Charisma is an indefinable power to draw others to oneself" (p. 191).

"Students working on group initiative problems frequently reveal leadership capabilities that would never become apparent in a traditional class" (Meier, Morash & Welton, 1980, p. 196). An example would be a class working on an initiative at a ropes course. One individual may be shy in class, but very inventive. This participant may be asked questions about how to complete an initiative. The participant shares a way to complete the initiative and, during the rest of the afternoon, is encouraged to take on a leadership role by the rest of the classmates. In the classroom setting this individual may never have had the opportunity at self expression, yet was encouraged enough to be a leader on the ropes course. This process would enhance the self-image of the individual (Ewert, 1989, p. 49).

According to Shivers (1980), leadership is "a phenomenon that emerges in recreation from at least four discernible forces. These forces—the individual with leadership potential, the follower who will be a member of the leader's group, the group, and the situation which provide the confrontation—come together to create the leader. Leadership is a function of any of these forces" (Shivers, 1980, p. 10). On a ropes course there are several forces that encourage leadership to form. Leadership may emerge among different individuals over the course of a day and may switch from one individual to another, depending on each participant's strengths. Different leadership styles may also be needed depending on the elements.

A group is "a collection of individuals with whom you will be working, interacting, transacting, making decisions, and taking action" (Schultz, 1989, p. 8). A task group is a group that works

on problem solving, information sharing, goal setting and making decisions to complete a task. The ideal size for a small group is between five and fifteen individuals who are interacting and influencing each other toward a mutual goal. The small groups on the ropes course are designed to take on the characteristics of being task groups. During the ropes course initiatives, members become dependent on each other to solve problems. They must stay in their small groups and work together to complete each task.

Team building is one of the key benefits of a ropes course experience.

There are a number of benefits that come from being part of a group, such as greater learning and satisfaction, forming synergy and finally, making better decisions on a complex task. According to the Webster's *New World Dictionary*, synergy is "combined or cooperative action or force" (Guralnik, 1980, p. 1444). Brainstorming and feedback are also used to complete tasks. By brainstorming, we are openly listening to all ideas and not judging the ideas. This openness allows for people to feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their thoughts in a non-threatening environment. Also, it helps bring out great ideas that are often not listened to by others in the group. A ropes course provides an opportunity for individuals to work together and to become a cohesive small group. The CSUS Ropes Course illustrates the experience of "discovering new ways to solve problems, resolve conflict, communicate, make decisions, cooperate and have fun!!!" (CSUS Campus Recreation Guide, 1994)

By experiencing a ropes course, different individual roles are brought out. Roles are, "the different behaviors we display in our interactions with others" (Schultz, 1989, p. 39). There are several roles that emerge in a small group setting. These include the leader, aggressor, dominator, recognition seeker, avoider, peacemaker and blocker. These roles are also part of society.

Some people act as leaders, others are avoiders or peacemakers. An aggressor may try to cause conflict between two groups while a peacemaker wants harmony. For example, on the CSUS Ropes Course a group of developmentally disabled students came out as participants. One young girl was the recognition seeker. She tried an initiative and did not succeed, so instead of receiving the positive attention which all the others received on the completion of the task, she sought negative attention by crying and acting up. The roles listed above and many others are seen during ropes courses. It is always interesting to challenge the leaders to be the followers and the followers to be the leaders. For example, a ropes course facilitator can ask the individuals who are leading the group not to talk, and ask the others to take on a leadership role. This would cause the non-leaders to become leaders and may help them become aware of their leadership skills.

Conclusion

Team building is becoming a priority in society today. A very effective way to enhance team building skills and cooperation is through participation in a ropes course experience. By becoming actively involved in a ropes course experience, participants are learning about themselves and their interactions with others. It is important for recreational sports departments to investigate the potential of incorporating these types of programs into their overall mission to their respective organization. If a ropes course is already available in the area, it is important for the recreational sports department to look at taking advantage of the tremendous team building opportunities with both full and part time staff. Ropes courses are an exciting opportunity that should not be missed.

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