Facilitator Skills and Knowledge

Experiential Education
Challenge by Choice ©
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Facilitation

Project Venture staff must be skilled facilitators in addition to having the technical skills required for outdoor adventure and wilderness programming. Frequently referred to as “soft skills,” these include:

- Understanding of Experiential Education
- Understanding of Challenge by Choice©
- Ability to develop and implement the Full Value Commitment (Contract)
- Group development and management skills
- Experience with activity design and sequence
- Facilitation and debriefing experience
- Service Learning background

This section merely provides an introduction to skills and concepts. As with any teaching methodology, using these skills takes training, practice, coaching and mentoring. For assistance with skill development for yourself and/or your staff, contact NIYLP or refer to the resources in the Appendix.
**Experiential Education**

is the tool that you will use to transform activities into learning experiences. PV facilitators must be knowledgeable in Experiential Education techniques as related to planning, activity/lesson design and facilitation.

The practice and process of making meaning from direct experience, generally in a group setting, Experiential Education places the responsibility for learning onto the learners themselves. The educator or leader becomes a facilitator of learning rather than a lecturer or impart-er of knowledge.

Lessons and activities that utilize experiential education are meaningful and relevant to the learner. In Project Venture programming, the use of culture and traditional values, outdoor education, connection to nature and service learning are intentionally selected because of the relevance to Native communities.

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**Experiential Learning** is an acquired, practiced and studied teaching skill. Effectively using this methodology requires training.

1. **Experience**
   - the activity (perform it, do it)

2. **Share**
   - the results, reactions, observations in the group

3. **Process**
   - the experience (discuss, analyze, reflect, debrief)

4. **Generalize**
   - the connection of this experience to the real world

5. **Apply**
   - what was learned or transfer to situations in school, home and community
The power of Experiential Learning is in the holistic approach. Participants can experience learning emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. The skilled PV facilitator determines which of these domains are emphasized through planning and the use of metaphor.

Experiential Learning is present throughout all core components and ensures that participants have an active role in learning versus a passive role. Instead of using lecture, worksheets and videos, participants in a Project Venture program challenge both the mind and the body. Activities are inclusive and incorporate all learning styles, thereby engaging all learners.

Principles of Experiential Learning
The principles of experiential learning that are crucial to your PV program include:

- Activities are planned using the Experiential Learning methodology.
- Activities take place in the natural world. Mother Earth is one of our greatest teachers, healers and classrooms.
- Activities are intentionally and developmentally sequenced and selected in relation to desired outcomes.
- Challenge by Choice® is incorporated and practiced.
- The Full Value Commitment is created, adopted and revisited often.
Challenge by Choice ©
(Originated by Project Adventure, Inc.) is a frequently misunderstood concept. The skilled facilitator is able to create an environment in which youth are empowered to challenge themselves by identifying their own personal goals within each activity or session. Youth commit to stretch and grow by engaging at levels that are just above their comfort zone both physically and emotionally. Challenge by Choice does not mean that youth are allowed to opt out of an activity, lesson or session. Instead, they recognize that they control their ability to manage their goals and that authentic personal challenge comes from within.

PV programs that understand and use Challenge by Choice effectively, have participants who:

- Learn that choice comes from within as opposed from outside pressure.
- Increase mastery of skills.
- Increase confidence, success and efficacy.
- Experience and value intrinsic reward.

A way to frame Challenge by Choice is to encourage each participant to find a way to contribute to the group’s efforts and successes while finding value in the experience for themselves.

In Project Venture programming, most activities occur in a group, team or clan format. This format supports the development of communication skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork, appreciation of differences and focus on how individual contributions support a greater good instead of simply individual achievement.
Full Value Commitment (Contract)

Intentional group development is an important part of the process. Helping the group to develop their behavior norms or rules is critical to long-term success. The Full Value Commitment (also known as Full Value Contract) is an important tool for teaching about group norms and empowering youth to self manage.

You can begin with this foundational Full Value Commitment to create a physically and emotionally safe learning environment within your program. The Full Value Commitment expands and grows as the group develops.

Also originally developed by Project Adventure, Inc., the use of the Full Value Commitment goes hand-in-hand with Challenge by Choice. Generally, a series of six or fewer norms are created and agreed to by the group. The Full Value Commitment norms used most often in Project Venture programming are:

- Be Here
- Be Safe
- Speak Your Truth
- Care for Self and Others
- Set Goals
- Let Go and Move On

Group Development

Size

The ideal size of a Project Venture group depends on several factors including the specific activities you are doing, the number of youth attending, the number and skills of staff and local operating guidelines. Additionally, it is best practice that facilitators work in pairs (ideally one male and one female) regardless of the number of participants. For risk management reasons, adults should never work alone with a group of youth. For most activities, a 2/12 ratio works best. Youth will be less able to opt out of participating with a smaller group. A minimum of six participants per group is important for effective facilitation of adventure-based activities.
Readiness
Skilled PV facilitators are constantly assessing groups and individuals within groups for readiness to move to the next level of challenge. Moving forward too soon can have a negative impact by setting the group up for failure. Even well established groups have “off days.” You may need to take the group back to a less challenging activity that has some slight adaptations so they can “regroup,” be reminded of norms and then move forward.

Much has been written about specific strategies for assessing group readiness. See the resource list in the back of this guide for recommended support materials.

Collaboration
Emphasis is on cooperation and collaboration. PV programming uses cooperation and group cohesiveness to overcome individual competitiveness. With experiential learning activities, groups develop shared goals. The group then measures success according to those goals. This team approach removes competition among individual group members.

Fun
Fun is critical to success in experiential programming. Fun serves a purpose in supporting participants as they struggle to complete challenges, overcome obstacles and solve difficult problems.

Reflection
Debriefing, or processing the activity, bridges the lessons from the activity to the goals set by the group. The reflection occurs through the debriefing process and is one of the key elements that sets Project Venture apart from recreational programming. Novice facilitators tend to rush through the debriefing component so they have more time for the “doing.” A skilled facilitator understands that debriefing is where the true learning occurs and provides participants with insights that they can transfer to other parts of their lives.
Activity Planning

Project Venture facilitators use a structured sequence of activities to achieve desired results. Each sequence is designed to ensure that youth are increasingly challenged physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially and spiritually. The structure provides an environment within which youth practice and utilize new skills such as creativity, imagination, determination, perseverance and communication. Most importantly, each lesson or activity in the sequence builds upon the learning from previous sessions. Youth continually use the skills learned in previous PV sessions.

Each activity is built around the Experiential Learning Cycle. This tool, developed by American educational theorist David Kolb, as part of his Experiential Learning Model, tells us that there are four components to every learning experience:

- A concrete experience
- Observation of and reflection on that experience
- Formation of abstract concepts based upon reflection
- Testing the new concepts (putting to use)

The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is not a closed loop, but rather a spiral. The abstract concepts (or learnings) from each activity are intentionally carried into each following activity and then built upon.

In PV, the ELC is used in a group setting. Your role is to facilitate the group to:

- EXPERIENCE the activity – (perform it, do it).
- SHARE the results, reactions, and observations in the group.
- PROCESS the experience – discuss it, analyze it, reflect on it.
- GENERALIZE to connect the experience to the real world.
- APPLY what was learned to the next activity or transfer it to a similar or different situation in their lives.

As you build your sequence and plan for the year of programming, the ELC spiral will continue through each Component (In-School, Out-of-School, Multi-Day Leadership Camp). The skills developed are built upon throughout the year. In reflection, youth and adults will be able to see the progression.

For more information on the work of David Kolb, go to http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-explrn/htm
Objectives
Identifying the goals that you want your group to work on in a specific session or lesson is part of the program design process and should be done before activities are chosen. In other words, activities are intentionally chosen because they will help teach a skill or will reinforce skills that have already been taught.

Connecting skills and concepts with the activity selection is how you, as a PV facilitator, will ensure that participants are increasing their competency and skills.

Questions to consider when selecting an activity:

1. What goal do you have for the group?
2. What objectives will you use to achieve this goal?
3. What activities would best lead to the desired goals and objectives?

Developing Objectives
An objective describes what the participant or group should be able to do at the end of the activity that they could not do before. In other words, objectives identify the specific skills that participants and groups need to accomplish as they work toward the overall program goals. A well-written objective contains measurable verbs, a description under which the performance or demonstration should occur and any criterion of acceptable performance.

There are two kinds of objectives that you will focus on: Learning Objectives and Behavioral Objectives.

Learning objectives identify a task that the students or group will be able to perform at the end of the activity or sequence. An example of a learning objective in a PV program may be:

“Students will be able to appropriately tie a figure eight knot without support from peers or staff.”

Behavioral objectives indicate what students must be able to demonstrate at the end of the activity. A behavioral objective has three components: student behavior; conditions of performance and performance criteria. A behavioral objective for a PV program may be:

“Each student will verbally participate in the debriefing processes contributing at least one statement that incorporates at least one aspect of the Full Value Commitments.”
Examples of Objectives:

- Demonstrate self control and the ability to cope with both successes and failures. (Behavioral)
- Apply appropriate spotting techniques on low challenge course elements. (Learning)
- Practice respectful behaviors toward self, peers and adults during the hike. (Behavioral)
- Correctly select and put on an appropriate harness from the storage shed. (Learning)

Check The Objective Cheat Sheet in the Appendix for examples of verbs that will help you to develop objectives for your activities.

Sequencing

Sequencing refers to the intentional order in which the facilitator presents the activities. The goal of sequencing is to present the activity in a way that helps participants to increase personal and group skills.

Develop your sequence for individual program sessions or days, as well as for the entire component (In-School, Out-of-School, Multi-Day Leadership Camp) and for your whole year program.

A skilled PV facilitator begins with less challenging activities (ice breakers, warm-ups and socialization activities) and then moves to activities that are more challenging physically, emotionally and cognitively. Always begin single program sessions with a warm-up activity to bring the group back together before attempting initiatives that require team work.

In a program year, begin with rapport-building activities before attempting problem-solving activities. As trust develops, the doors open for more challenging activities.

Novice facilitators are frequently so excited to bring their groups to the high challenge activities that they rush them through the foundational activities. This results in a less than desirable experience for some or all members of the group. Assessing group readiness to move forward is critical. Skilled facilitators generate as much excitement, fun, challenge and perceived sense of risk with ground activities or those that require little or no equipment. This allows time for the necessary group development and will pay off significantly when the group is ready to go to the next level of challenge.
It is important to realize that effective sequencing does not always equal forward movement. Sometimes, if you are experiencing difficulty with the facilitation of a group that you’ve been working with successfully, the group may benefit from returning to a rapport-building activity to re-establish their group dynamic. Remember, all groups have off-days. Another cause can be that your chosen activity, that was highly effective with one group, appears to fall flat with another. Skillful facilitators have a large range of activities and can easily assess their group’s progress and adapt or swap out activities that aren’t working for the current group.
Categories
Experiential Learning activities can be grouped into categories to help you with selection. They follow a continuum from simple/low challenge to complex/high challenge. Activities are chosen to build skills that prepare the group for more challenge in a structured sequence throughout the program year.

As you become more skilled in facilitation, you will be able to adapt any activity to the level of challenge. As an example, many of the simple ice-breakers can be adapted for more challenge simply by incorporating blind folds. Introducing blind folds too early, however, before the group has developed trust and communication skills, will be detrimental to the group development process.

### Categories of Experiential Activities

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>How It Is Used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice Breakers / Socialization Activities</td>
<td>Participants get used to their surroundings and to people they may not know. Perceived risk is low: fun level is high.</td>
<td>Begin the team building process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warm-Ups</td>
<td>Similar to socialization activities, but more active to “warm up” cold muscles and minds.</td>
<td>Transition from simple ice breakers to activities requiring more physical activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-inhibitors</td>
<td>Include silly and unusual components such as yelling, singing, animal noises etc.</td>
<td>Reduce anxiety levels, include laughter and help participants break out of ordinary ways of being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving Initiatives</td>
<td>Challenge the group to begin working together. Primarily mentally/ cognitively challenging, although they may also include physical and emotional challenges.</td>
<td>Participants begin to explore and deal with frustration and emotions. Most successful when some level of team building has been established. Improves “group think.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust Building Activities</td>
<td>Group members must depend on each other physically or emotionally in order to complete tasks. Includes some level of perceived risk or consequences.</td>
<td>Participants continue to develop group skills through trust activities along with safety and spotting skills that will be essential to future activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Elements</td>
<td>Can be performed on the ground or not far enough above the ground to require special safety equipment such as helmets and harnesses. Participants must be aware of spotting and caring for self and others. Typically some sort of equipment is used to facilitate these activities.</td>
<td>Excellent for problem-solving and group processing. It is critical to allow enough time for several trial attempts and for the group to work through frustration. Low elements range from simple to highly complex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Elements</td>
<td>A challenge course (ropes course) is a structure more than 12 feet in height on a specially designed course. Facilitation of high elements require special safety equipment, procedures, training and experience.</td>
<td>Frequently a peak experience. Support and participation of group members is important for the participant on the element to challenge his/her self. A skillful facilitator working with a well-developed group can turn a seemingly solitary activity into a group experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor and Wilderness Activities</td>
<td>Activities such as hiking, mountain biking, archery, rafting, etc. The selection is dependent on your access to natural resources. Sequencing and debriefing is important in these activities. Staff must be well-trained in the technical skills needed to implement these activities.</td>
<td>Utilizes many of the skills developed throughout the program year.</td>
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Facilitation

Facilitating experiential activities includes the following processes:

**Briefing (Beginning):**
Introducing, explaining, and setting up the rules of an activity. Creating a safe learning environment.

**Leading (Middle):**
Monitoring physical and emotional safety, providing guidance, supporting participation.

**Debriefing (End):**
Guiding Reflection. Discussing purpose, direction, and how to apply what was learned to other situations.
Experiential activities have three very specific stages: the beginning, the middle and the end.

The Beginning – Also called briefing or framing, is when the facilitator introduces the group to the activity. Briefing helps participants connect with the relevance of the activity they are about to experience. The facilitator “sets the stage” and explains any rules, guidelines or instructions.

Skilled facilitators use clear, simple language which provides enough information to understand how to proceed. Over-talking the instructions tends to create confusion and boredom. Remember that you are facilitating, not teaching or lecturing. Using stories and metaphors helps participants connect to the activity more deeply. Stories from Native traditions lend themselves well to experiential activities. “Briefing” includes establishing and discussing ground rules that should be present at every activity. These might include an agreement to work together to achieve group goals, an agreement to follow safety standards and rules, and an agreement to give and receive feedback (positive or negative) and to work to change behavior when appropriate.

The Middle – The activity is actually happening and is also referred to as leading. The role of the facilitator is to monitor for involvement and adherence to the Full Value Commitment. The facilitator is responsible for helping the group to maintain physical and emotional safety as well as providing guidance – and, if the activity requires, keeping track of time or counting goals or errors.

The End – Debriefing is the end of the activity. This is when a series of intentionally designed reflection questions are asked for the purpose of discussion and guidance in applying this learning to other situations.
**Briefing**
An example of briefing or framing is taken from the activity “Bear, Salmon and Mosquito.” The facilitator may say, “This activity gives us an opportunity to understand and practice our fight or flight response and to understand more deeply how we can anticipate and manage conflict. We will be working in two groups and this line down the center will serve as our point of conflict.”

The facilitator goes on to clearly explain the procedures for the activity. Generally, an example or short demonstration is provided by the facilitator and one participant. The goal is stated, “The goal is for each small group to win members from another group.”

**Leading**
Leading is when a facilitator enforces the rules, keeps people safe, and provides guidance during an activity. One of the keys to successfully facilitating experiential activities is the ability to let groups struggle as they problem solve. It is natural to want to become involved during an activity and provide the answer, especially when frustration is obvious. However, this would deprive the participants of important lessons and skills. There are times when a facilitator needs to interject in an activity. It is a skill to know when to observe and when to provide guidance.

**Debriefing**
Debriefing is the process of reviewing the activity and bridging the lessons from the activity to the goals originally set for the group by the facilitator. The debriefing process following an activity (or sometimes in the middle of it) is what makes experiential learning educational. **Debriefing or processing the experience is critical to helping youth discover the connection between what they just experienced and lessons for life.**

**Facilitating the debriefing process takes skill and practice.**

**Here are some things to consider:**

- Have the group stand or sit in a circle. The circle is conducive to communication and community building.
- Have clear objectives before you start – what do you want the participants to walk away knowing?
- Use open-ended questions.
- Use questions that focus on the positive.
- Use questions that focus on skill building
- Allow time for youth to have “aha” moments of learning.

There are many techniques for helping youth talk about what just happened to them.
Here are some ideas:

■ Describe WHAT you just experienced.
■ Tell us WHAT is significant or important about the experience.
■ NOW describe WHAT part of the experience applies to your life and HOW.

Here is one framework for approaching debriefing:

■ What? Have the group stand in a circle. Go around the circle asking for one sentence or phrase that describes the activity. A variation is to ask one person to start the description using a phrase or sentence and have each subsequent person build on that phrase until the story of the experience is told.

■ So What? Involves each person describing what the activity meant or felt like to them. Framing this question within the context of the Full Value Commitment is helpful. The facilitator can ask, “So, in terms of our Full Value Commitment, what did we do well in this activity?” Group members will answer with statements like, “I felt Safe when people were keeping their hands out in front of them when we all had our eyes shut.”

■ Now What? Asks participants to think about and share how they will apply the lessons learned in the activity to their own lives. The facilitator asks probing questions and guides the discussion, but does not provide answers.
Sample debriefing questions from the activity “Bear, Salmon and Mosquito” include:

1. Can you describe what you were feeling when you stepped up to the line to show your creature?

2. Can you describe what you were feeling when the other team showed their creature and you had to instantly decide to chase or be chased?

3. Can you describe what you were feeling when you showed your creature and it was the same as the other side?

4. Did you see examples of the Full Value Commitment being used in this activity?

5. How do you think these feelings relate to our responses to conflict?

6. Do you feel that your response was helpful or harmful to this activity?

7. Can you describe some ways to avoid, diminish or prevent threatening situations that may come up in your life?

**Developing Debriefing Questions**

Develop your questions in advance, as part of your session planning. This will help to maintain your focus on the stated objectives. Many facilitators write their debriefing questions on note cards that fit into their pocket. They can then reference them when the debriefing begins. Others write them on a flip chart in advance of the activity, keeping them covered until the debriefing begins.

You may alter your questions during the actual debriefing session, but planning in advance gives you an idea of what you are going to discuss before the activity. This is especially helpful if an activity goes in an unexpected direction.

Sequencing your debriefing questions is as important as sequencing your activities. Before diving in at the outset with complex questions such as ‘How do you feel about what you just experienced?’, a skilled facilitator will follow a developmental sequence.
The chart below illustrates objectives with appropriate debriefing questions. In this example you can see how the debriefing questions are designed to help achieve the activity objectives.

**Objectives**

- Experience “trust.”
- Examine trust in themselves.
- Examine trust in the group.
- Explain the difference between direct trust and indirect trust.

**Debriefing Questions**

- What did you just experience?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What did you learn about others in the group?
- What was most challenging about today’s activities?
- Was there anyone in this activity you depended upon or trusted?
- Why did you trust that person?
- What is easy, to lose or to gain trust?
- Are there people in your life whom you trust?
- Why do you trust them?
Incorporating Debriefing Tools

As you become skilled in debriefing, you may decide to add some simple props or tools to support youth to frame their responses. An example is to put a group of postcards with varied images on a table. Have at least twice as many images as you do participants to provide choice. Images that work best represent or evoke an emotion and offer a wide range of scenes (i.e., ocean, desert, city, mountains, people, weather, animals, etc.).

Ask each participant to select a card that best represents what about the activity was most challenging to them. Or how it feels to trust others. Or a variation of one of the questions in the example above.

As you go around the circle, ask each person to hold up his or her card and share why they selected that card in relation to the question. You may hear responses like, “I picked this picture of the ocean because the waves are breaking against the rocks. And when we were trying to solve the puzzle, I felt like I was in the middle of all that surf.” Or, “Sometimes I feel like this moose, all alone in the middle of this field. I want to be part of the group, but sometimes I feel all alone.”

There are many manufactured debriefing tools and aides available for purchase. These can be great to get you started, but also, be open to creating your own.
Resources for Debriefing

Several good resources for debriefing, or reviewing, include:

- Clifford Knapp’s *The Art and Science of Processing Experience* (1972)
- *A Teachable Moment: A Facilitator’s Guide to Activities for Processing, Debriefing, Reviewing and Reflection*: Cain, Cummings, Stanchfield
- Roger Greenaway’s excellent free email newsletter from the United Kingdom titled *Active Reviewing Tips*, http://reviewing.co.uk. Look through the archives for literally hundreds (if not thousands) of tips for effective, creative, and dynamic reviewing along with many feature articles of interest to experiential educators.