Facilitation: an instructor's journey of discovery

Article by Samantha Twigger

About Samantha
I am currently finishing my third year studying Adventure Tourism and Outdoor Recreation (joint honours) at the University of Derby. Previously I worked in Snowdonia National Park as an outdoor instructor for a multi-activity residential centre for three years.

Photos - Backgrounds: the author. Campfire: Creative Commons License. Raft building: Arun Jospeh.

A few months ago I was sitting in my favourite coffee shop in Porthmadog with a visiting fellow outdoor Instructor debating models of facilitation, and in particular reflection.

By reflection we were referring to evaluating and analysing the outdoor activity with the group so that they may learn, grow and change.

The conversation was intriguing because getting groups to reflect on the outdoor activity as part of the session was not something I had been encouraged to do in my workplace. We were trained to supply the taster activity, and I guess, hope reflection takes place of its own accord.

After our debate I still believe any experience in the outdoors must lead to some sort of reflection. For example, the mere contrast to the urban environment compared to places of natural beauty can bring an individual to an appreciation and perhaps a respect for their surroundings. Just like as Rusty Baillie former Outward Bound Instructor famously advised to "let the mountains speak for themselves".

Nonetheless the mountains do not speak to everyone and so to reach a deeper level of understanding of relationships with the environment, oneself and others (3), there needs to be some sort of higher level of facilitation to be powerful enough to adjust behaviour or change negative cultural thinking.

I am aware there are many different types of programmes to suit different outcomes: recreational, educational, developmental and therapeutic (5), all requiring different types of facilitation.

However, at the end of the debate, and indeed my coffee, I realised that to not use my sessions to allow individuals to learn something from their experience felt like a wasted opportunity. I know I am limited by the programme I am intended to carry out, but I can still contribute on some sort of level. Since I am someone who works in but fundamentally loves the outdoors, I could not allow an opportunity to go by; I believe that the contribution reflection would make, whatever size of this, would enable a stronger bond to the outdoors and develop people on a personal level.

>>> Next page

MY JOURNEY

After this debate I wasted no time trying to apply reflection into my sessions with a hit and miss result. I realised that my approach and other factors in the reflection process affected the outcomes dramatically.

To the outdoor practitioner there are a lot of obvious aspects that would be taken into consideration when reflecting but here are some, maybe less obvious, factors I came across along with some real examples in facilitating reflective group discussions:

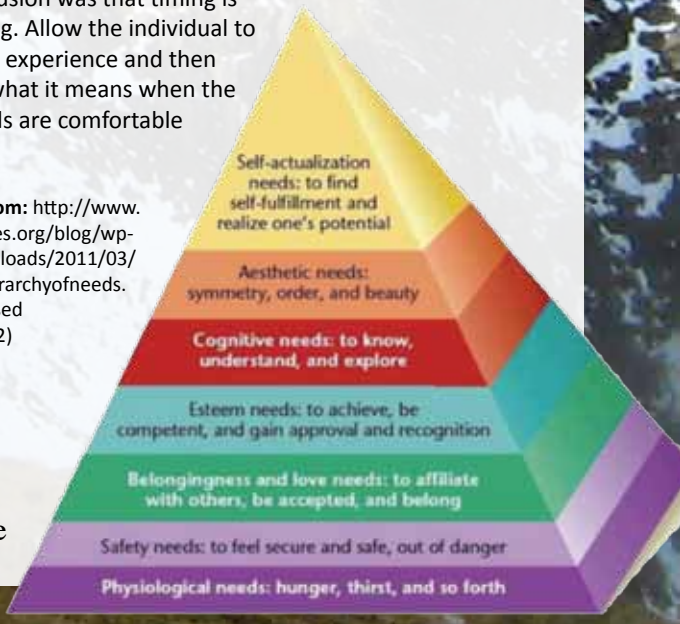
1. Timing

Sometimes you cannot orchestrate the perfect time to reflect because it needs to take place at the right moment. For example, one attempt of mine was to try and reflect in the minibus journey from our local gorge, after doing a thoroughly soaking wet and adrenaline packed session on a cold March day. My group were so 'buzzed' and tired from the session that the answers I got were more excitable than those of a deep understanding. Although important they also needed to have time to process the session.

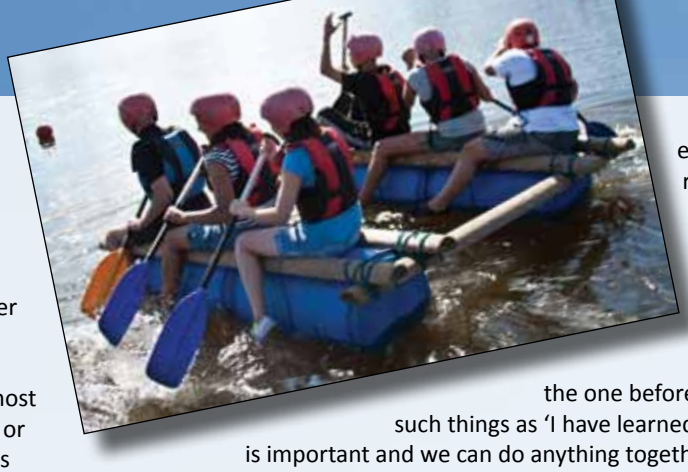
Answers consisted of 'that was the best experience ever' and 'I can't believe I just did that'. The session worked in catalysing the individual's psychological state, however it did not provide a more dissected analysis of what it means to that individual such as why the outdoors is important because it provides great experiences, illustrated by the first quote, and then self-esteem issues that the second quote indicates.

The reflection often works best as close to the experience as possible but within the limitations of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see diagram). So to try and reflect when the group is fatigued and/or cold is not an effective state for individuals full participation.

My conclusion was that timing is everything. Allow the individual to enjoy the experience and then process what it means when the individuals are comfortable enough.



Sourced from: http://www.peakoilblues.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Maslowhierarchyofneeds.jpg (accessed 06/09/2012)



2. Organic situations

In fact sometimes it is not necessary to seek the time to reflect at all because sometimes individuals/ groups will start processing the situation themselves. This is most likely in longer activity programmes rather than just a one day taster session.

Here I found that my place was more to make the most of this organic situation by funnelling the individual or group in reflection to allow them to lead the process (6). This often resulted in more honesty and produced more participation.

In my experience sometimes creating opportunities can be as simple as having a beach camp fire whilst toasting marshmallows or on residential programmes, having hot chocolate before bed.

3. Objectivity

It is hard when these situations happen not to get too over the top and lose objectivity. I found that in the guiding process it can be easy to influence the individual's response to a question. Saying things like 'what did you learn about teamwork in the session?' or 'did you use communication to help you complete the task?'. I found that using terminology such as: 'teamwork' and 'communication', often resulted in pre-learned responses. This does not mean I could not receive proper insight from the group but meant I was more likely to be endangering the time of reflection by prompting their predicted expectations of what I was after.

My example took place on a horrible windy day; I took a group of 12 year olds on a rafted canoe session. I had a bit of spare time at the end of the session so took the opportunity to reflect. We took it turns to share what we had learnt. I noticed every response was elaborate and sounded very familiar to the one before. Saying such things as 'I have learned teamwork is important and we can do anything together' and 'I know more about myself now'. I am at risk of discrediting someone's judgment of their experience but I could not help feeling that their responses were what they felt I wanted to hear, rather than guiding them into how the session relates to their lives and feelings. Every member of the group mentioned terminology like teamwork or communication without going into much depth. When I questioned on 'how?' or 'why?' most seemed unsure and struggled to answer.

4. Non-rewarding

This leads onto my last point that in reflection the facilitator should not rely on rewarding good behaviour with praise. Reflection should instead be self-discovery. Rather than praising a group or individual for what the leader believes to be correct behaviour, a facilitator should instead question further about what aspects resulted in teamwork and why it was beneficial to work as a team. Of course I understand being able to encourage and enlighten individuals to healthy behaviours is what makes a good facilitator in the first place, however I believe the delivery of this is crucial. This comes down to how feedback is received.

For example if a group on an expedition had been supporting each other by having the stronger members helping weaker members, perhaps helping carry more stuff or slowing the pace down, then when it came to the reflection of the facilitator says

'that was brilliant you worked well there', 'great teamwork' and 'so and so really made a difference', then this would more likely result in the individuals processing that they did it because it was the 'right thing to do' or maybe only did it in the first place because wanted to be praised or look good.

However in non-rewarding reflection by analysing why this helped the end product (in this case completing the expedition), this would show why such behaviour is important and beneficial to the individual and the group. Such conclusions would be transferable into other future situations.

In contrast if people are just learning correct responses there will never be an adjustment to those individuals' attitudes. Or if the level received in feedback was just that their behaviour was good then individuals will most likely repeat it but not take hold of their own understanding and analysis of the situation.

It is still important to praise behaviour in the activity itself, this helps mould the session and have a framework to reflect upon later.

SUMMARY

Facilitation itself has been labelled the "cornerstone" of the adventure learning experience (2) and certainly even without reflecting on peoples' experience individuals can still learn, grow and change, but perhaps not as effectively as with facilitation. Therefore looking into the techniques used is invaluable to any outdoor practitioner. Here I have mainly focused on reflective group discussions because I believe reflection to be a basic technique that I personally could apply easily and onto most situations.

From this I have identified my own guidelines of timing, organic situations, objective and non-rewarding to be considered.

The outdoor industry has grown from its founding days and alongside it new generations of adventure facilitation keep emerging and adapting. It is imperative that we grow with it and I hope my considerations have given some thought into your own practice and will contribute to the ever on-going discussion of adventure facilitation in coffee shops everywhere. ■

References

1. Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. Psychological Review, 50, pp 370-396.
2. Nadler, R. and Luckner, J. (1992). Processing the adventure experience: Theory and practice. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/ Hunt.
3. Priest, S. (1986). Redefining outdoor education: A matter of many relationships. Journal of environmental Education, 17 (3), pp 13-15.
4. Priest, S. and Gass, M.A. (1997). Effective leadership in adventure programming. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
5. Priest, S. and Gass, M.A. (1999). Six generations of facilitation skills. pp 215-218 chapter in Miles, J.C. and Priest, S. Adventure programming. Pennsylvania: Venture publishing.
6. Priest, S. and Naismith, M. (1993). The debriefing funnel. Journal of adventure education and outdoor leadership, 10 (3). pp 20-22.