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Designing the Group Experience

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Facilitation is an art that involves a combination of practice, observation, knowledge of theory, and creativity. Effective facilitators act as creative “designers” of lessons and experiences. Through careful observation of all the elements involved in a group’s personality and setting, they intentionally choose and order activities in order to maximize learning opportunities. Many educators call this important aspect of facilitation and teaching “sequencing.”

Sequencing involves consciously and thoughtfully presenting activities in a specific order to enhance learning outcomes and maintain the emotional and physical safety of the group. There is no one correct method or specific model for sequencing programs or classroom lessons. It is a dynamic process that takes into careful consideration the group’s goals and agenda, participant’s emotional and physical safety, the personality and dynamics of the group, available activities, allotted time, and the physical environment.

Effective facilitators pay attention to the group development process and allow time for trust building. It is important to balance the level of the activity and or challenge presented and the participant’s ability to meet the challenge or activity. The time needed for participants to create relationships and build trust is different for every group. When this connection and sense of community are developed, groups will take learning further and get more benefit out of the group activities they engage in. Allow time for this happen by choosing activities that build upon each other.

Recognize that every group is unique. Every group has a different personality and participates in activities in a different way. Even when working with groups with similar characteristics, in the same setting, with the same program goals, the actual lesson plan changes with each different group in response to that group’s particular personality and needs. Activities you carefully plan prior to a workshop or group session may be specifically relevant for one groups’ personality and needs and not another’s. This is one of the exciting aspects of group facilitation. There is great variety in group experience and varying opportunities to take advantage of teachable moments. With experience, facilitators develop the art of reading their group and adjusting activities in a creative way throughout group process to move learning and change forward.

Careful sequencing maximizes participation by allowing people to engage at a pace that works for them. Experiential group work can be very powerful. If groups are ready to engage in the process, great things can occur. Conversely, if a group is not emotionally or physically ready to encounter certain “learning adventures,” the experience could be damaging or inhibit growth and learning. Effective facilitators/teachers always approach activities with intention, thoughtfulness, and flexibility—evaluating their groups and refining their plans as needed.

Sequencing Suggestions

- Be ready with a continuum of activities. As a facilitator it is important to have a repertoire of activities that build upon each other. Having activities in your “back pocket” allows you to be ready to deal with changes in direction and learning opportunities that arise in an ever-changing group.
- Be flexible enough to throw out or let go of that well developed plan if the group needs are different than expected. Be willing to let go of your agenda to meet the needs of the group.
- “Indicator” activities are helpful. Use activities that help you read and evaluate the group. For example: before going on to the course and teaching safety systems, facilitate a fun partnered tag activity that involves moving around in a small space and practicing appropriate touch. This introduces the idea of appropriate touch and close personal space that are important to the spotting techniques necessary on the challenge course. It also helps me evaluate whether the group is engaged and ready to take the responsibility of balancing fun with safe, focused behavior.
- In challenge course situations pre-group communication is imperative. Take the time to talk with a group’s program leader or previous facilitator about the group and it’s goals, expectations and personalities. Keep in mind that you will always have to balance that information with your own perceptions and experience of the group.
- Informed consent is critical. Let participants/students know what is expected of them and the type of activities in which they will be participating. Informing the group about the upcoming activities doesn’t have to give away the novelty of your approach. Think about informed consent as empowering participants with needed information. If reluctant students make a choice not to participate, they will at least know what opportunities they might be missing.
- Continually observe your group and reevaluate your plans in order to be sure the activities fit the needs and goals of the group and the specific situation.
- Be sensitive to the time of day and physical environment when presenting activities. Consider the physical comfort and attention span of students when sequencing activities.
- Take time to build relationships and trust between group members.
- Be prepared for the unexpected.
- Take advantage of teachable moments.

Many times I have carefully planned out activities and prepared supplies for a group in advance only to completely let that plan go after the group has shown me that they had very different needs than I expected. Each individual class always varies in their response to activities as well, gleaned different insights and lessons from the experience. That is the beauty of what we do in experiential facilitation. We meet people where they are and nurture spontaneity of experience to take advantage of teachable moments.

This lesson is compliments of **Jennifer Stanchfield**, author of *“Tips & Tools: The Art of Experiential Group Facilitation”*.

To find more information and to contact the author, please visit: www.experientialtools.com



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