

Building and Using Portable Ropes Course Initiatives

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Abstract

This experiential workshop utilized various portable ropes course initiatives that could be used in either the backcountry or classroom environments. Participants learned how a challenge course class researched and built various portable ropes course elements for one of their projects. This session included brainstorming and active participation.

Keywords: Portable Ropes Course, Teambuilding, Backcountry setting

A portable ropes course initiative consists of props and elements that are used for teambuilding, communication, leadership, and trust. Portable initiatives, sometime similar to permanent low ropes course initiatives, are usually made of ropes, wood, PVC pipes, material, or any other material that can be moved from one location to another. To be able to utilize various ropes course initiatives, it is important to understand facilitation. Facilitation is the process of working with a group as a leader, but not always leading. “Facilitators must create space for learning and understanding without having control over the outcome or a necessarily ‘tightly’ specified curriculum or learning outcome” (Allison, 2003, p. 23).

A key aspect to facilitation is the experiential learning cycle. This cycle has roots in beliefs of John Dewey (Rohnke, Wall, Tait, & Rogers, 2003). The experiential learning cycle includes the experience and then being able to process what occurred through a series of questions. These questions include the examination of “what” just happened, then reflecting on the experience by asking “so what” does that mean, and this is then applied to the situation by asking “now what” will we do with the learning or the experience (Rohnke, et al., 2003).

During the spring of 2004, a class at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA was asked to create portable ropes course initiatives while taking REC X230: Challenge Course Leadership and Facilitation. The course description stated that the course included an examination of “Techniques and models used in challenge course leadership and facilitation. Students will learn leadership styles, challenge course technology, facilitation models, safety guidelines, and learning styles.” This course was a 4-credit quarter class that had several assignments throughout the quarter.

The element construction assignment included student groups of 2 or 3 working together to build any portable element. Students were responsible for submitting a budget for approval prior to building the element. This entire project was funded by a teaching enhancement grant, offered through the College of Agriculture at Cal Poly. Students planned, organized, built, and then facilitated using their newly created portable

initiative. After facilitating their initiatives for their peers, the students also facilitated the initiatives during the Cal Poly Open House.

Various portable initiatives were demonstrated during the workshop.

Participants from the session then participated in a brainstorming activity - which asked the following questions:

- Which activities do you feel could be used in the front-country and the backcountry?
- How can we use the “natural environment” for creating elements? Is this LNT?
- Should challenge course elements be used on WEA courses?
- What activities have you done in the past in the wilderness?

The group felt that several of the initiatives (pass the penny, helium stick, all aboard, and lycra tube) could all be used in both the front-country and the backcountry. The natural environment can be used for creating elements by being part of the framing and debriefing, as well as using sticks, pinecones, or rocks in various portable initiatives. The overall feeling was that initiatives should be used on WEA courses and can be used in a way that is Leave No Trace. Various other initiatives and activities were discussed to be used in the backcountry setting.

References

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