

Leadership challenge courses for implementing experiential learning & ethical decision making

Deirdre Dixon
The University of Tampa

Erika Matulich
The University of Tampa

Raymond Papp
The University of Tampa

ABSTRACT

Leadership challenge courses, also called “ropes courses” have become integrated into many business schools and business retreats and have become the focus of enterprises wanting to improve experiential occurrences, increase trust and/or to build teamwork. Nevertheless, frequently organizations have no knowledge of the pedagogy behind the idea of the challenge course, and individuals enjoy a fun outdoor experience that is never linked to long term learning. This paper examines the leadership challenge courses with regard to Bloom’s taxonomy of learning objectives (1956). The taxonomy is comprised of three domains and six levels of learning. As students advance through the levels, the learning requires more critical thinking (Anderson & Sosniak, 1994). This paper examines the most effective experiential use of challenge courses for students and for business executives, asking them to move away from rote memorization at the knowledge level and progress to the evaluation level which requires assessing information and determining the value of an idea. The proposition is to facilitate learning that lasts (Mentkowski et al., 2000), from the challenge course to the board room. This paper will discuss leader challenge courses and the various features, confer differing research methods used to study the outcomes, examine the pedagogy behind the learning and proffer suggestions for best practices in using these types of courses.

Keywords: experiential learning, Bloom’s taxonomy, challenge course, leadership development, teamwork, ethics

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INTRODUCTION

“Ropes” courses, also termed “challenge” courses, have been around at least since the 1940s (K. E. Rohnke & Tait, 2013). Although many believe these courses originated for military training, today the courses are used in a variety of settings, some of which include education, businesses, developmental, and therapeutic; they exist for a number of reasons including trust, teamwork, communication and fun (Hatch & McCarthy, 2005; Stewart, Carreau, & Bruner, 2016). Some groups use them to focus on self-efficacy (Cordle, Puymbroeck, Hawkins, & Baldwin, 2015; Eatough, Chang, & Hall, 2015) and even the treatment of grief (Swank, 2013). Regardless, if the focus is just for fun or a specific learning outcome, all of these courses are part of a larger body of outdoor education that includes activities accomplished outside of a classroom and are adventure based, such as white water rafting, mountain climbing, outdoor conservation and experiential education (Ford, 1986). Our focus in this research is on ropes courses (subsequently referred to as challenge courses), how they have been used, and how to improve their use in collegiate learning environments to provide learning that lasts.

BACKGROUND OF CHALLENGE COURSES

Challenge course are elements usually constructed from wood, steel cables, ropes and utility poles; these courses are typically classified as “high” or “low,” depending on the height and risk levels of the activities (Priest & Gass, 2005). High challenges use some form of a belay system, either static or with another person (Tucker, Sugerman, & Zelov, 2013). This belay system is the safety mechanism to prevent a fall (Prouty, Panicucci, & Collinson, 2007). Individuals use equipment such as helmets and harnesses to prevent injury. These high courses focus primarily on individual development (K. E. Rohnke & Tait, 2013), and are usually over 20 feet high.

Low challenge courses use a system of spotting for safety and generally range from ground level up to 12 feet high, focusing primarily on group solving problems and team building (Stewart et al., 2016). Occasionally researchers have termed activities such as ice breakers, games and group initiatives as a separate category (Martin, 2006), but for this research these activities will be part of the low ropes designation. This paper will focus on the “low ropes” challenge course.

The “elements” of the course are characterized as each object or each challenge activity that the groups attempt. Often elements of the low challenge course have items attached to the ground, such as poles, cables and walls. Groups must then “solve” the task using whatever they are given, such as pieces of lumber, time constraints, and so on.

Length of time of the training can also vary. Commercial groups usually do a day or more of training, but school groups are usually significantly shorter at a few hours or less (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). All of these different activities are still monitored by the same association.

The Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT) is the primary and largest governing body for standards for management and construction of courses; ACCT was formed in 1993 when challenge course operators understood the importance of standardizing operations of these types of activities (ACCT, 2004). The first industry standard was published in 1994, and in 2016 ACCT became an Approved American National Standard (ANS), which means they have a standards process that is “open, fair and has allowed for equal representation of all material affected parties” (Catchings, 2016, p. 1).

“Challenge by Choice” (K. Rohnke & Grout, 1998, p. 11) is an important element in these courses. Facilitators brief participants that they should do only what they feel comfortable doing, and it is each individual’s choice to be challenged (Carlson & Evans, 2001). Groups are encouraged to embolden one another, but not bully individuals (ACCT, 2004). The idea was to invite participants to engage in the activities rather than forcing them (Chase, 2015). Individuals then have the free will to select their level of involvement.

Facilitators on the course are also relevant to learning. Students learn from those teachers who go outside the norm and bring different dimensions of learning and problem solving skills (Katz-Buonincontro & Phillips, 2011). Individuals across the university are looking at ways to provide student engagement through a myriad of leadership strategies (Shillingford, 2013), the challenge course offers these uniquely different opportunities to bring students together. Some professors have become facilitators; leading their classes through the course is a chance for the students and the teachers themselves to see the professors as facilitators and as leaders (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).

CHALLENGE COURSE AS AN EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Despite calls for research showing that challenge courses actually improve learning, so far the studies with actual data are slim (Martin, 2006; K. E. Rohnke & Tait, 2013). There have been outdoor adventure programing meta-analyses (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2008; Bunting & Donley, 2002; Cason, 1994; Neill, 2003), but our focus -- as is the focus of a meta-analysis by Gillis and Speelman (2008) -- is on challenge courses specifically and when are they most effective. Their research, which examined 44 studies, found that adult groups (versus children groups) had the most positive effects with experiences that focused on team building and ethical decision making, and the therapeutic settings had the highest outcomes while students in a university setting had the lowest effect sizes (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). The results lead us to believe that challenge courses used in university settings need to provide more impact. In order for more effective challenge courses to be implemented in an educational setting, our proposal is to look at challenge courses using Bloom’s Taxonomy.

BLOOM’S TAXONOMY

Benjamin Bloom (1956) developed his taxonomy to categorize reasoning skills in classroom settings. He created six levels of learning, as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix), beginning with the simplest learning up to level six, which is the most complex. The idea is that learners, as they progress, move from the knowledge level of rote memorization to the evaluation level of the process (Krathwohl, 2002).

The knowledge level comprises the facts of the main ideas being taught. The second level, comprehension, builds on memorization of facts and requires students to interpret information. The third level is application. This level requires students to apply the knowledge they have learned. Analysis is the fourth level and students must be able to see patterns to analyse a problem. The fifth level is synthesis where students are expected to use their knowledge to make ethical decision and predictions about what could happen in the future. In the final level, evaluation, students are expected to consider all the information and judge its value or the prejudice behind the information and create their own ideas and thoughts about it

(Bloom, 1994). The goal is students move up through the levels and attain the highest level – the evaluation or knowledge creation phase.

Looking at the challenge course in a university setting, one can use Bloom's taxonomy to garner a more effective framework for the facilitation of the challenge course. Using our private university as a case study, it is illustrative of how the use of the feedback and the collaboration between facilitators and professors in the challenge course can afford higher level learning to our students at each level.

A revision for Blooms taxonomy was published in 2002 (Krathwohl). This revision is focused on kindergarten through 12th grade and the six cognitive domain names were changed to use verbs: recall, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create (Mcdaniel, 2010). This version provides a framework for educators to match their learning objectives to their exam questions.

CASE STUDY: EVOLUTION OF A CHALLENGE COURSE

Our school is medium-sized private university in the South-eastern United States. We have had a challenge course for over a decade. Our course was originally built for the Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) Program, but quickly became available to the entire campus. Our facilitators began with limited official training, but within the first year of its opening to the entire campus, we utilized ACCT trainers to annually certify the facilitators. Our challenge course length averages two hours, a typical class period. Occasionally groups will do a half-day session, and sometimes an hour long class will sign up.

The challenge course at our university has evolved over the decade of its existence. When we began our training at the challenge course, we would cycle groups through each of the elements and once they figured out how to accomplish the objective of the challenge, we would divulge the solution, or tell simply them they did a "great job" at solving the problem. Our focus was on safety and challenge by choice (Carlson & Evans, 2001). We provided the students participating in the course "mission parameters" of how to achieve the task. If they did not accomplish the task successfully, we provided them with the optimal solution. We were clearly working at the bottom levels of Bloom's taxonomy, the knowledge and comprehension levels (Bloom, 1994).

A few years of experience on the course and continuous ACCT training to keep the certifications current led the university to change some of the procedures to make the learning more concrete. We did not want the challenge course just to be fun, but also to include more concrete learning. Facilitators began to communicate with the professors and link to specific outcomes desired for the classroom. The course administrator, along with the facilitators, began to categorize the elements into groupings such as teamwork, problem solving, communications, etc. This coordination allowed the professors and the facilitators to have a clear vision of the desired outcomes. Professors had input as to how the students should benefit from participation in the program. The students were expected to operate at the analysis level to scrutinize the task and see patterns and investigate what needed to be accomplished to solve the assignment (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001).

Our current level of sophistication, after a decade of experience and reflection, is at the higher end of the Bloom's taxonomy framework. The students are now required to operate on the synthesis and the evaluation levels (Armstrong, 2016). They must reflect on what has occurred, apply it to the remaining elements and also apply it to their learning and work in the classroom or on the job. Ethical decision making and the use of teamwork are the key objectives. Students

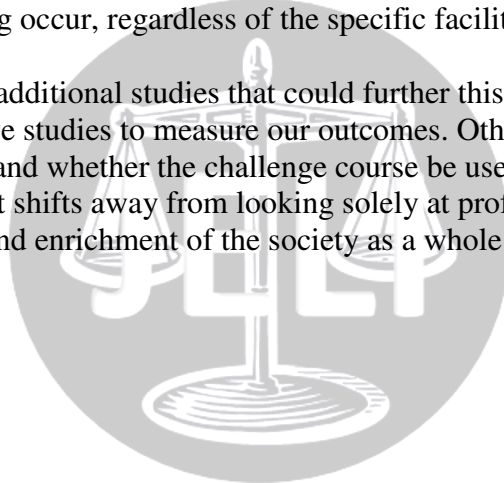
debate with one another, recommend how to accomplish the task and select the solution best for the group. The scenarios are descriptive, depending on the class. The facilitators and the professors work together in advance to provide the most robust experiential day on the course to allow our students at each level, graduate and undergraduate to become critical thinkers.

CONCLUSION

Challenge courses, if used properly, can clearly benefit the participants (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). This paper has discussed challenge courses, their uses, and suggests a specific pedagogy of Bloom's taxonomy to further examine the learning in university settings to ensure the proper outcomes are achieved. Currently challenge courses may be an effective tool in a university setting, but the data is not yet conclusive. Using one university as a case study, our paper advocates the framework of Bloom's taxonomy to further the learning of the groups navigating the course. Moving forward, the University will begin to gather empirical data on outcomes and will better be able to mitigate some of the suppositions and obtain factual data.

As with any study, limitations can be a challenge. A facilitator's impact on a group goes beyond his or her certification and training, but some studies have shown that challenge courses can be effective, and learning occur, regardless of the specific facilitator (Gillis & Speelman, 2008).

There are numerous additional studies that could further this research. Our plan is to finalize complete quantitative studies to measure our outcomes. Other ideas include specifically looking at business schools and whether the challenge course be used to teach more "responsible leadership" -- leadership that shifts away from looking solely at profit, but also builds leaders who act for common good and enrichment of the society as a whole (Oplatka, 2017).



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APPENDIX

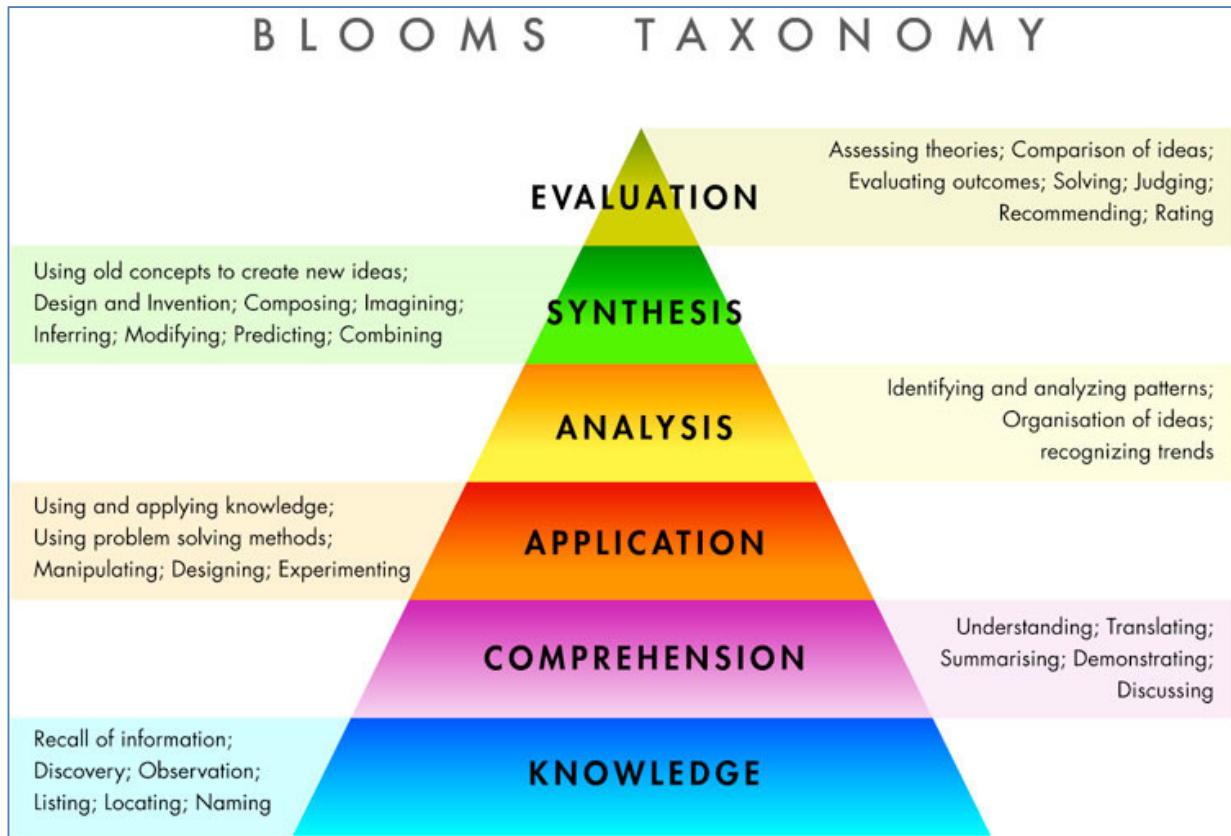


Figure 1: Bloom's Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2016)