
Challenge by choice: A sojourn at the intersection of challenge and choice.

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I know who I am and who I may be, *if I choose*.

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

What the Spanish author, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra said in the 17th century holds true for every human being today. What is the value of having a choice? Is it important for a person to be able to choose the challenge they are prepared to engage with? How does ability to choose not only the challenge but also the level of participation, affect the ultimate learning? Is *challenge by choice* truly possible? Is it practical? Itin (1997) said, "I continue to remain intrigued with how 'challenge by choice' remains for me both a viable yet problematic principle" (p. 1). This paper explores the problematic principle of challenge by choice with the intent of turning it 'inside-out' to answer the above questions and raise new questions along the way. Showing the relationship of challenge by choice with a participant's movement along the 'edge' of his or her *comfort zone*, the article also examines the need for us as facilitators to look for alternatives to *putting* participants *out* of their comfort zone and instead work on creating safe environments which help participants in *extending* their comfort zone *while being inside the edge*.

Let me begin by narrating an experience from one of the programs I observed at a rather well known organization in the USA which set me thinking that challenge by choice is good in theory but so often poorly managed. Looking back at that experience as I write this paper, I wonder do we treat challenge by choice as a box that must be ticked while delivering a program. Do organisations in the field of adventure and outdoor education give lip service to the principle of challenge by choice? The residential program was aimed at introducing school students to different activities like bushwalking, rock climbing, abseiling and rafting. On the day when participants were to first experience abseiling, the facilitator decided to increase the challenge by switching from a 70 feet rock face to a 100 feet rock face. The participants greeted this news with mixed reactions. Some were excited and thrilled, others were simply petrified. For some participants, the level of fear increased exponentially once they

had their first view standing at the edge of the cliff. The facilitator's reaction to the participants' fear was exceedingly disturbing. In his briefing to the group the facilitator said, "This only looks scary, but it actually isn't. So don't worry about it." Giving participants a *choice* he added, "You can either do the activity or you can sit and watch others. If you like you can help your team members remove their gear once they reach the bottom." Should we call this a choice? Of the 18 participants in the group 15 decided to go ahead with the activity and three *chose* to watch others from the sidelines. The silence that prevailed in the group as participants threw around glances waiting to see if their mates took the challenge on or backed down from it, made it quite evident that some of the participants said yes due to peer pressure and the need to maintain their self-image. The ones that hesitated making a decision were the same ones that had to be lowered down after literally freezing halfway down the rock face. To my utter astonishment, during a discussion with other fellow instructors later that night, I discovered none of the instructors found this instance different from their usual experience. At the end of the day, the facilitator believed he had practiced challenge by choice by letting the group choose whether or not to participate. Is this how we should understand and practice challenge by choice? My intention in mentioning this incident is not to imply that this is how *all* programs are conducted. I simply aim to draw attention to this misinterpretation and oversimplification of the principles of challenge by choice as a backdrop to this paper.

Why is choice important for an individual?

Choice is empowering. Giving someone a choice conveys positive regard. It says, "I trust you;" "I think you can make a good choice;" "I have confidence in you;" "I accept your choice." By giving people a choice we build their internal locus of control (Neill, n.d.). Giving participants the ability to choose allows them to set their own goals and define 'success' for themselves. The chances of participants experiencing success are much higher if they are able to define goals that apply to them (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1998). A meta-analysis of research in outdoor education by Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997) reveals that, due partly to voluntary participation, adults on adventure education programs experienced more

positive impact when compared to youth. The analysis also showed that the ability to choose increased the participant's level of motivation.

According to Connole (1993) "... human actions have reasons. Actions are preceded by intentions and may be accompanied by reflections. Actions take place within a structure of social rules within which they have meaning..." (p. 13). Taking this in context of challenge by choice, factors like fear of failure, fear of being laughed at, peer-pressure and self-esteem influence a participants' 'actions,' in this case the choice about their level of participation. The environment that we as facilitators build on our programs lays down the structure of social rules. According to Frank (2001) the goal is to create an atmosphere where each participant feels physically and emotionally safe. If participants perceive the environment to be safe then they feel comfortable in taking risks, such as making mistakes and trying new ideas

Challenge by choice and experiential education

Itin's (1999) Diamond model of the philosophy of experiential education drew on the consolidated definition of experiential education by Dewey, Hahn and Freire and argued that there is a transactive relationship not only between the teacher and the student but also the learning environment and the subject matter. Experiential education recognises that the teacher plays a role in the educational process as opposed experiential learning processes that can exist without the presence of a teacher.

The issue of power, defined as the ability to influence, is clearly a force and factor in education and especially experiential education. The role of a teacher is to challenge, not "by force" but to influence and use the position to help the student

move outside of what is known. (Itin, 1997, p. 3).

The principle of challenge by choice was coined by Karl Rohnke, who co-founded Project Adventure (PA) in 1971. Before starting PA, Rohnke worked with Outward Bound (OB) for 3 years, an organisation founded on Hahn's principles who thought that youth were suffering from the de-motivating ills of modern life and that it was the responsibility of educators to impel them into educative challenges (Itin, 1999). Working with public school students Rohnke realized that this 'impelling into challenge' technique did not work within an urban educational setting (Rohnke, 2000). In his Kurt Hahn Address at the Association for Experiential Education conference in 2000, Rohnke (2000) said that challenge by choice emerged from the "instructor/student impasse." The central idea is to encourage students to try new things such that if the student does not like the suggested activity then giving him or her alternate challenges is the next step. Knowing that trying new things meant possible failure, which is something most people run away from, Rohnke argued that, "A trail-and-error, go-for-it, approach in a supportive setting produces results..." (p. 167).

The continuum shown in Figure 1 (Neill, n.d.), contrasts how facilitators can alter their leadership style in relation to their participants' engagement with challenges and the level of participation. For example, a facilitator can adopt an autocratic role (Priest & Gass, 2005) forcing participants into a challenge or they can assume a more abdicratic role, with a 'go for it' approach.

Challenge by choice is on the far left of the scale depicted by the continuum. It is here that the facilitator takes on an abdicratic role (Priest & Gass, 2005) with respect to helping participants to engage with challenges. Also on the left of the scale is *challenge of choice*, an approach that Schoel and Maizell (2002,

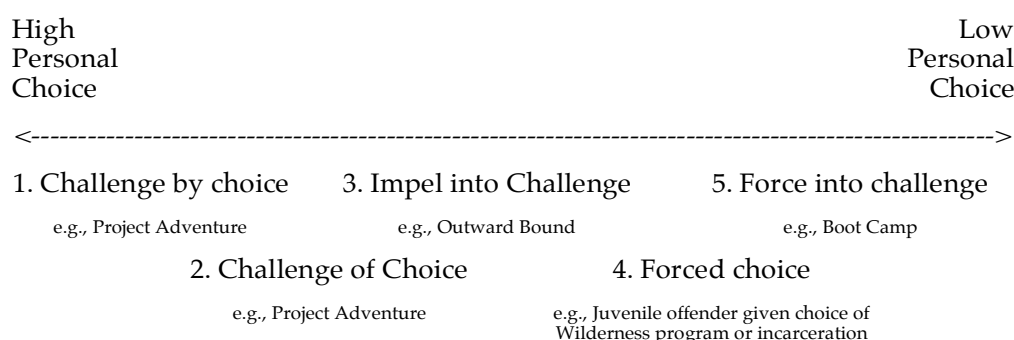


Figure 1. Continuum depicting adventure program philosophy about the degree of individual choice in participation (Neill, n.d.).

cited in Neil, n.d) explained as letting a participant choose the level of challenge rather than choosing whether or not he or she will participate.

Today, challenge by choice is explained through the philosophy of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC) and its principle of the *Full Value Contract*. "The concept of ABC stems from experiential education and has existed in the United States since Hahn introduced his concept to OB" (T. James, 1980 cited in Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002, p. 278). The establishment of Project Adventure formalised ABC with the aim of bringing Hahn's ideas into traditional schools (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). According to Schoel et al. (1998), ABC is a flexible 'therapeutic tool' for use in almost any setting and is a mix of experiential learning, outdoor education and group counseling. Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) expanded this definition by adding 'intrapersonal exploration' to it. ABC primarily entails activities that enable clients or participants to 'learn by doing' (Gass, 1993a).

A Full Value Contract (FVC) is a set of rules or guidelines that the group participating in an ABC program establish for themselves. The idea behind a FVC is to create an environment conducive to participants feeling physically and emotionally safe to be themselves. There are various ways a group can go about creating a FVC, but usually the group and the facilitator discuss the objectives and goals of the program and then go on to identify what participants as individuals and as a group will need to do to be successful. A FVC can be viewed as a representation of what the group members expect of each other. Frank (2001) added, that a "Full Value Contract is a willingness to work toward group goals, and help others achieve personal goals" (p. 6).

So what is 'challenge by choice' all about?

A FVC deals with group needs while challenge by choice meets the needs of an individual (Frank, 2001). A participant must have control over what he or she will and will not do. Challenge by choice means that as a participant I should be able to choose whether I want to take part in an activity; I should be able to choose how much or little I want to share with other group members in a discussion or activity; I should be permitted to decide the level of challenge I opt for in an activity. If I choose not to take part in the task for the day, then there should be another related task or role that I can play. As a participant I should have the right to contribute to an activity in a different yet challenging way. For a participant to have a real choice two things need to happen. First, the facilitator and the group need to be supportive of a participant's right to choose. They need to understand a participant's fears and reasons to do less or more. Second, there need to be real alternatives to the task of the day. "Will I do the activity?" If the answer can only be a yes or a no, then

there is hardly a real choice. To create viable, equally challenging yet less threatening options, the needs of each participant have to be considered and understood individually. Ideally, a facilitator will be aware that some challenges in a program will exceed, or fall short of, some participant's limits and he/she will design alternative challenges. Facilitators will also need to be careful when presenting alternatives to participants so that participants are not "put on the spot" or unnecessarily exposed to the group. For example, after introducing the participants to the pumper pole the facilitator can say 'it is up to you to decide how high you want to climb and from which point on the pole you want to jump for the trapeze.' Adding that they have more than one chance at it and can choose to get comfortable by starting their jumps from a lower point, can further bolster the creation of a safe environment giving participants a chance at building their courage to go higher. Challenge by choice is a strategy built to promote challenge, increase the ability and comfort to take risk and enhance learning (Lissen, 2000). According to Dyson's study (1995, cited in McKenzie, 2000) participants found the challenge more meaningful when they had ownership in choosing the challenge they were working to achieve. The principle of challenge by choice also recognises the importance for a participant to be able to say no. At times, refusing to be a part of an activity can be more beneficial than being unwillingly involved in it. For example, a child who is always told what to do, how to do it and even when to do it, will find it empowering to have the choice to say "no" and nevertheless have the group members respect the choice.

The ideas of Schoel et al. (1998) and Carlson and Evans (2001), as shown in Table 1, run parallel and even overlap when they put forward the core principles of challenge by choice and what they have to offer to a participant. Schoel et al. (1998) went on to add supplementary principles that should be considered when challenging a group or a participant.

- All participants do not need to complete every activity that has been set out for them. The idea is for them to be able to pick and choose what appeals to them and what level of challenge they are ready to take on. According to Frank (2001) facilitators must ask themselves whether they are really giving their participants a choice when their expectation of each participant is for them to complete the activity.
- The importance of sequencing activities must be reflected in the program design. If the challenges built into the activities are incremental in nature then they have greater influence on the program outcome (Kimball & Bacon, 1993)

Table 1. A comparison of principles of challenge by choice from Schoel et al. (1998) and Carlson and Evans (2001).

Schoel, Prouty and Radcliffe (1998)	Carlson and Evans (2001)
<i>Challenge by choice offers the following to a participant.</i> • An opportunity to attempt a personally challenging activity in a supportive and caring environment. • Openness and ability to 'back-off' when performance pressures and/or self-doubt become too strong with the knowledge that same or similar opportunity will be available again. • Recognising that attempting the challenge is more important than completing it. • Respecting an individual's ideas and choices.	<i>Challenge by choice is based on three core values.</i> • Participant sets his or her own level of success. Importance is in reaching one's own predetermined goals and not in completing the element (activity). • Participant can choose his or her level of participation and can 'back-off' whenever performance pressures or self-doubt become too strong. • Enable participants to make informed choices. A participant needs to know about the challenge and risk (both real and perceived) before making his or her choice about participating and the level of participation.

- Time spent on goal setting is essential. For participants to make informed decisions about what challenges they want to take on and their level of participation in each, it is important that they know what they are getting into. They should be made aware of both the real and perceived risks.
- "Group pressure is very real" (Schoel et al., 1998, p. 133). Once the group members know each other it becomes easier to support each other. Again the sequencing of activities is important here; keeping more challenging activities for the latter part of the program enables a participant to take-on bigger challenges because by then group members are more supportive of each other and the environment. Group pressure used in a positive manner becomes group support.

Often the principle of challenge by choice is incorrectly defined or over-simplified. Some facilitators and participants think that challenge by choice means that a participant does not have to participate in an activity if they wish not to. Challenge by choice does not mean that a participant can decline to be a part of an activity and instead sit and read a newspaper. It is not a toggle switch where participants make either-or decisions about participating (Frank, 2001). Challenge by choice was created in contrast to the more hard-line 'impel into challenge' approach (Neill, n.d) yet it is not an 'exit strategy' for those who are scared, confused or do not see the potential learning in an adventure

experience (Lissen, 2000). Challenge by choice does not ask "Will you do this?" instead it asks "How will you do this?" (Frank, 2001).

Challenge by choice in practice

Today, challenge by choice has gone far beyond the boundaries of Project Adventure. It can be seen in action at group initiative programs, adventure based wilderness programs, programs for physically and intellectually challenged, classrooms, ropes challenge courses and more. Schools like Disha (meaning Direction in Hindi) in the Indian Himalayas, inculcate the principle of challenge by choice from the day a child walks into the school. Disha practices theme-based education and every child is given the right to choose how they want to learn about the focus area for the day/week/month. For example the 'law of gravity' can be learnt in a classroom through lectures, it can be experimented with by timing different objects dropped from a height, it can be experienced on an abseiling trip, or in a physics laboratory. It is the choice of a child to pick the method and level of challenge that he or she is ready to take on. Children take the initiative to sign up for different challenges each of which is shaped to impart knowledge about topics that make up the year's curriculum.

High element challenge courses are often used to boost a child's self-confidence and self-esteem (McKenzie, 2001). Looking at things from the challenge by choice perspective, a major emphasis is put on giving participants a choice to decide their participation level and not on options between challenges (Lissen, 2000). For example the participant can choose how high they

want to climb up on the pumper pole before jumping for the trapeze. If the participant chooses not to do the activity then they are asked to be part of the activity by being involved in secondary roles like spotting or holding a rope bag. Even though these activities are not unimportant, they are nonetheless presented as lesser roles when compared to active roles of climbing (Lissen, 2000). Schoel et al. (1998) suggest the GRABBS modality checklist that assesses the Goals, Readiness, Affect, Behaviour, Body, and Stage of Development of a group. Using this checklist not only for the group but also for an individual participant, a facilitator can assess the need for creation of additional challenges to augment the techniques of using different levels of the same challenge or "relegating participants to lesser roles" (Lissen, 2000, p. 20).

In parallel with these activities, the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT) in the USA has looked at the principle of challenge by choice from another perspective and is enforcing the importance of 'universal' challenge courses. The ACCT defines a universal challenge course as one that has multiple choices and levels of challenge for participants. Each option gives a participant the opportunity to participate significantly. It mandates that a participant should be able to select any option and be physically, intellectually, emotionally or socially challenged. Furthermore, it requires a challenge course to be designed in a way that does not show any intentional alterations for persons with special needs (Carlson & Evans, 2001).

Limitations and dilemmas of practicing challenge by choice

Citing Medrick (1977), Neill (n.d) said:

Instructors should be wary of their power and the temptation of falling into a parent role in directing individuals' participation. Rather, the instructor should strive towards playing an adult role, which engages participants' adult states and interacting with participants on adult terms and respecting their capacity and knowledge with regard to being able to decide what activities best meet one's individuals' needs.

In this regard, Frank (2001) suggests that the degree of guidance with respect to choices depends on the 'age and level of maturity' of the participant. Referring to her desire to decide for a participant with cerebral palsy, Julie Carlson (Carlson & Evans, 2001) says "it was my sensitivity and compassion for Rick as a human being with feelings and emotions that caused my desire to stop this from happening" (p. 61). The dilemma raised by Carlson and Evans (2001) is can a facilitator ethically allow a participant with limited

ability to understand and process given information, to make the choice of participation or choose his or her preferred level of challenge?

The limitations of the challenge by choice principle can also be observed on journey-based adventure programs where it is hard to turn back. For example a participant does not have much choice on a wilderness expedition when the group is already half way to their destination. The option of dropping out or choosing a different level of the challenge is not truly available. Schoel et al. (1998) argued that there are times when a facilitator needs to make the choice for the participant and say "This is the way it's going to be. Do it!" (p. 132). Having said this, facilitators need to be aware that every time they make a choice for a participant, they take away the "essential power" (Schoel et al., 1998, p. 132) from the participant.

Philosophy of challenge by choice and educational and learning theories

Utilising the challenge by choice philosophy as a design principle for classroom lesson plans or adventure-based programs helps create a more meaningful experience for a participant (Schoel et al., 1998; Lissen, 2000; Rohnke, 1989). The key elements of such a design should be: consideration of a participant's goals and objectives; creation of activities that pose appropriate challenge for participants; inclusion of other challenges with same or similar value; provision of differing levels of challenge within an activity; and creation of a safe environment where participants are empowered to make choices and their choices are respected. Challenge opportunities can be created in a classroom using Howard Gardner's (2006) theory of multiple intelligences where the same subject matter can be learnt in different ways and students can choose the methods that suit their leaning style.

In my opinion learning truly takes place when a participant chooses the way of engaging with the unfamiliar. Pushing comfort zones does not increase learning experiences (Leberman & Martin, 2002).

The 'Edgework' model presented by Nadler and Luckner (1992) (see Figure. 2) represents how a participant expands his or her comfort zone and how the unfamiliar slowly becomes a part of his or her comfort zone.

Experiential learning literature has suggested that learning happens when a person goes out of their comfort zone. Panicucci (2007) expressed some popular notions of the comfort zone model when she stated:

It exposes students. Their usual defenses are taken away, and there is an opportunity to experience their inner

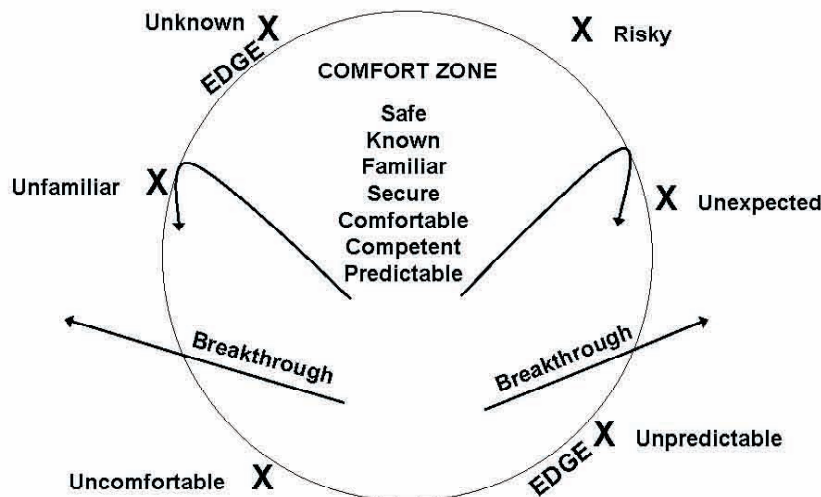


Figure 2. The 'Edgework' model (Nadler and Luckner, 1992).

being – to have wonderful ideas. People rarely take themselves to this place purposefully because it is uncomfortable, so it is a special growth opportunity when they are brought there during a carefully facilitated experience. (p. 41)

In his critique of the comfort zone model, Brown (2008) threw light on some problematic and unsubstantiated assumptions inherent in Panicucci's (2007) statement. By way of reducing ignorance (Wagner, 1993), Brown asked should 'exposing' a student be considered positive? Does stripping away one's defenses reveal their 'inner being'? He questioned the suitability of "an instructor with no clinical training to encourage a student [...] to take risks given that the outcome of participation is uncertain?" (p. 4). The odds sit against an instructor comprehending *every*

participant's assessment of real and perceived risks. Given this limitation, empowering participants to choose their level of participation becomes all the more exigent.

Quoting Davis-Berman and Berman's (2002) findings, Brown (2008) raised a disturbing issue. He said that by intentionally increasing the level of perceived risk instructors may push participants beyond their ability, which can, in turn, cause emotional and psychological issues. It is, indeed, a thought-provoking, and unwanted, consequence of our facilitation decisions. Can challenge by choice perhaps be used to moderate such a risk? Instead of heightening the level of perceived risk and pushing the participant out of his/her comfort zone with the hope that the participant will take on the challenge,

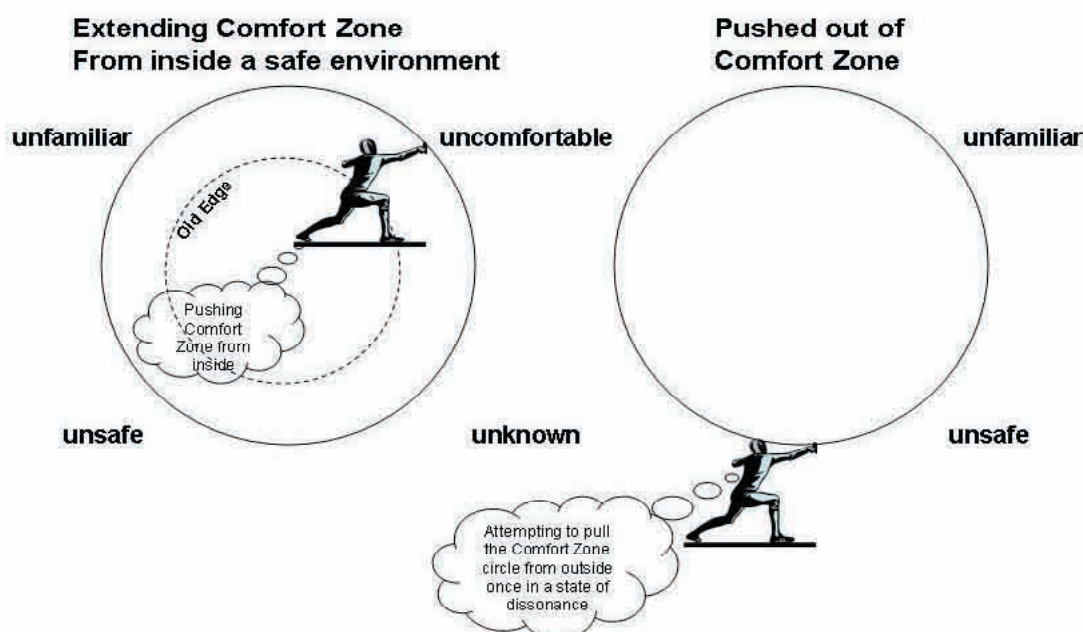


Figure 3. Alternate strategies to enlarge comfort zones.

succeed at the set goal and hence build their self confidence, a program designed keeping in mind the principles of challenge by choice (Schoel et al., 1998), allows the facilitator to make the participant aware of both real and perceived risk and gives the participant the knowledge of how to engage with the unknown and willingness to extend his/her comfort zone. Rather than dealing with the disequilibrium created by dragging participants out of their comfort zones, a facilitator can perforate the boundaries of their comfort zone. A facilitator can thus help participants take a step closer to new possibilities by creating a supple environment that allows them to choose their own level of challenge. At the heart of this paper lies my desire to bring the movement around the edge of the comfort zone under a microscope. As facilitators we should *not* be looking to push participants *out* of their comfort zone. We must instead create safe environments which help participants in stretching their comfort zone while *being inside the 'edge.'* A participant must feel safe to say 'I will only do this much today. And tomorrow I may choose to do more.' Is it fair to put participants out of their comfort zone expecting them to pull the circle and make it bigger to fit their current position and still call it challenge by choice? In order to keep adventure programs from becoming dysfunctional and creating a negative impact on the participant (Brown, 2008), enlargement of comfort zones must happen from inside the circle. Figure 3 illustrates this point visually.

Adapted from Nadler and Luckner's Edgework model (1992), my model (shown in Figure. 4) makes an addition showing the importance of challenge by choice in expanding a participant's comfort zone and

engaging with the unfamiliar. What I suggest is not about the choice of engaging with the unfamiliar but 'how to engage with the unfamiliar.'

For example, a participant's fear of heights can be dealt with in more than one way - whether it's on a high elements ropes course or on a rock face. If a participant is given the choice to pick which challenge that suits his or her style of learning and confronting the unfamiliar then odds of succeeding are in favour of the participant.

Conclusion

Challenge by choice seems at odds with adventure education as it does not coerce, impel or lure participants into the challenge. Instead it allows participants to choose when, how, and how much of the challenge they are ready to take on. George Elliot (1876) (nom de plume for British novelist Mary Anne Evans) said, "The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice" (page unknown). Challenge by choice and adventure education meet in their common goal of promoting personal growth. For me, challenge by choice recognises the human need to be in control and have the essential power to choose. It harnesses this need and approaches learning from a different angle, one that has the learner more willing to try new things in a supportive and respectful environment. Challenge by choice concentrates on the quality of learning rather than the number of learners.

An individual's choice should always be made by the individual.

(Carlson & Evans, 2001, p. 62).

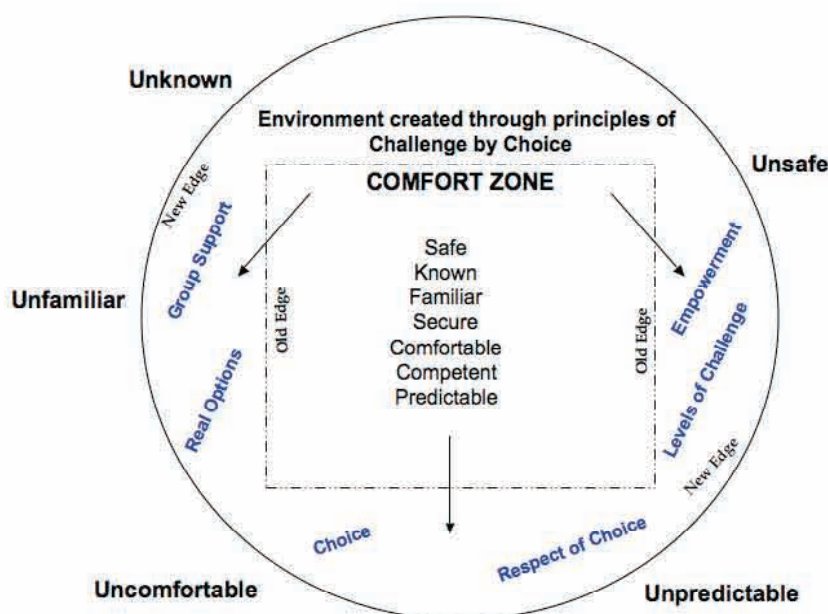


Figure 4. A new model for expanding a participant's comfort zones (based on Nadler and Luckner's (1992) 'Edgework' model).

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