



Learning to be a group facilitator in outdoor education: using self-awareness to overcome fears and be fully present

Glyn J. Thomas

To cite this article: Glyn J. Thomas (2019) Learning to be a group facilitator in outdoor education: using self-awareness to overcome fears and be fully present, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 19:4, 287-300, DOI: [10.1080/14729679.2018.1509720](https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2018.1509720)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2018.1509720>



Published online: 20 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1283



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Learning to be a group facilitator in outdoor education: using self-awareness to overcome fears and be fully present

Glyn J. Thomas

School of Education, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, Australia

ABSTRACT

Facilitating groups in outdoor education can sometimes be very challenging, and self-doubt and the fear of facilitating inadequately add to difficulties that facilitators must sometimes manage. In this paper, I will explore some of the ways by which facilitators contribute to the difficulties they experience and, furthermore, to explore some solutions. Negative self-talk can sabotage our best intentions as facilitators, by reducing the levels of free attention that are needed to facilitate well. I draw on the findings of a naturalistic inquiry conducted with 7 facilitator educators and 104 graduates of facilitator education programmes. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and qualitative surveys were analysed using the constant comparison method. . Based on my research findings, I contend that outdoor education programmes do not need perfect facilitators. Rather, facilitators who can be authentic, self-aware and fully present for their groups will improve outdoor education programs.

KEYWORDS

Facilitation; facilitator education; outdoor education

The challenges of facilitating groups in outdoor education

Facilitating learning experiences with groups in the outdoors can be unpredictable. Sometimes, it is an effortless task and groups require few interventions, and they facilitate themselves. Other times, facilitating outdoor education groups can be difficult, and there are many ways for things to go wrong. From time to time, there can be conflict or disharmony between group members; possibly the environmental conditions are not ideal, and groups do not respond well to the challenges those conditions present. Furthermore, the leaders seem unable to connect with the group despite their best attempts to build rapport and support the group. Thus, the difficulties may appear overwhelming.

The underlying causes of the difficulties in such outdoor education groups can be complicated. When challenges arise, the potential for the facilitators to experience self-doubt, insecurity and self-sabotage is significant. Some facilitators seem to be able to disassociate from the group's problems; but, for other leaders like myself, the difficulties can have a personal impact. My failure to connect with a group, or my failure to help them function effectively, can cause nagging feelings of inadequacy, which then fuels self-consciousness and leads to a deeper state of incapacitation and ineffectiveness.

In this paper, I will address the uncomfortable reality that facilitating outdoor education groups can be challenging and that sometimes the facilitator contributes to the problems experienced by the group. I will revisit the findings from my doctoral research, completed in 2008, and supplement

them with a review of the recent literature, to provide strategies to help facilitators manage difficult groups. Although some findings of this research have been published already (see Thomas, 2008a, 2008b), this paper presents as-yet-unpublished findings. The intent is to invite the reader to come on a deeper journey of discovery, of inner work, to explore what can impede a facilitator's effectiveness, and how those problems can be avoided. In places, the writing style in this paper is informal. However, consistent with research within the interpretivist paradigm, I believe that the occasional description of my own personal journey of development as a facilitator does not detract from the rigour or relevance of the findings. To begin the discussion, in the next section, I will review some of the literature to summarise the role and purpose of group facilitators in outdoor education.

What do outdoor education students need from their group facilitators?

For the emerging facilitator, there are numerous outdoor leadership texts providing strategies, tools and ideas that leaders can use to help outdoor education groups achieve their objectives (Black & Bricker, 2015; Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Martin, Breunig, Wagstaff, & Goldenberg, 2017; Priest & Gass, 2017; Prouty, Panicucci, & Collinson, 2007; Stremba & Bisson, 2009). The facilitation strategies, processes and theories covered in these texts are essential and necessary to facilitate groups effectively. In previous writing, I classified the approaches taken in these texts as either *technical facilitator education* (focused on skills and strategies), *intentional facilitator education* (focused on the theories and values that explain how to use those skills and strategies effectively) or a combination of both these approaches (Thomas, 2008b). Meanwhile, other texts address additional dimensions of facilitator education.

Some outdoor leadership texts also address the importance of the personal qualities of the facilitator and the interpersonal relationship between the facilitator and group. Simpson's (2003) text, *The Leader who is Hardly Known*, draws on Tao philosophy to encourage experiential educators to develop a personal philosophy, which optimises their effectiveness by improving their awareness of themselves in the learning process. Elsewhere, I categorised this approach to facilitator education as *person-centred facilitator education* (Thomas, 2008a). Simpson argued that it is only with this increased awareness that facilitators can effectively facilitate student-centred experiences and maintain productive relationships with students. The counselling field has long acknowledged the role of the relationship between client and counsellor. Some counselling approaches see the relationship as being central to the helping role, while others focus on the outcomes to be achieved through the relationship (Egan, 2002; Rogers, 1989a).

Furthermore, Rogers (1983, 1989a, 1989b) claimed that the personal qualities and attitudes of the teacher or counsellor are more critical to their effectiveness than any methods they employ. Rogers explained that methods and strategies would not be effective unless the facilitator demonstrates a genuine desire to 'create a climate in which there is freedom to learn' (Rogers, 1983, p. 157). He described the essential personal qualities of a facilitator as *being real*, because facilitation is not about playing a role and effective facilitators do not conform to educational formulas; *prizing, acceptance and trust*, communicating that the participant is fundamentally trustworthy; and *empathic understanding*, which helps establish a climate for self-initiated, experiential learning (Rogers, 1983, 1989a).

Ringer (2002) advocated a 'subjectivist' view of group leadership, and facilitation that frees the facilitator from 'the illusion that leaders are in control of the group ... [seeing] our interactions with the group in a new light: as influence, rather than control' (p. 62). In this respect, facilitators are still intentional in their approach to group facilitation, but their role is aided less by technique and more through the facilitator's presence. Thus, it is the facilitator's presence that becomes the focus of the intentionality not his or her actions or responses to the group. Ringer's (2002) perspective, based on psychodynamic theory, takes the emphasis off learning skills and methods by explaining that effective group leadership is

not about control of the group or dazzling with knowledge or skill, but simply maintaining yourself fully present with the group and providing appropriate support for the group to achieve its goal. (p. 18)

Although the prospect of an approach that seeks to 'do less' may sound attractive to the emerging facilitator, the emphasis on maintaining a *dynamic presence* is potentially more demanding on the facilitator than other models of group leadership, which emphasise techniques and methods. In contrast to these technical facilitator education approaches, Ringer (2002) deliberately avoided 'algorithmic step-by-step recipes that are intended to substitute for the judgment and experience of the group leader' (p. 38). For Ringer, developing as a facilitator required 'paying close attention to the complex constellation of feeling, thinking, action, intuition, and memories and fantasies that is *you*. That means addressing and dealing with your own vulnerability and failings' (p. 19). Likewise, Hunter, Bailey and Taylor (1995) explained that the key to being an effective facilitator has 'more to do with who you are and who you are being for the group you're working with. ... The relationship you develop with the group is the key' (p. 201). Similarly, Hogan's (2002) approach to facilitator education enumerated the importance of relationships and the need for facilitators to be *fully present* and authentic with group members.

Moreover, Ghais (2005) explained that no amount of brilliant skills and techniques would help emerging facilitators if they lack personal awareness, and 'whether we're aware of it or not, our inner states, moods, attitudes, and thoughts are always on our sleeves' (p. 14). Goleman's (1996) study of *emotional intelligence* found that 'emotions that simmer beneath the threshold of awareness can have a powerful impact on how we perceive and react, even though we have no idea they are at work' (p. 55). Goleman's description of self-awareness as the 'non-reactive, non-judgmental attention to inner states' (p. 47) has clear relevance to facilitating groups in outdoor education. A facilitator who can demonstrate high levels of self-awareness, as described by Goleman, would be careful to avoid getting 'carried away by emotions, overreacting and amplifying what is perceived' (p. 47). High levels of self-awareness would help the facilitator to monitor his or her own feelings as they occur, even amidst turbulent emotions.

Herein lies one of the complexities of group facilitation identified by Ghais (2005): facilitators 'must be able to bring authenticity, confidence, presence, trustworthiness, and calm into the room. It is much more difficult to explain how to build these inner qualities than to teach skills and techniques' (p. 14). Outdoor educators can improve their facilitation by working to 'understand and enhance the natural strengths of [their] own presence, mitigate the negative aspects, and develop a unique, effective individual style' (Ghais, 2005, p. 18). Still, this can present difficulties.

One problem with relying on the presence and personal qualities of the facilitator to facilitate groups effectively is the difficulty of trying to practise self-awareness in real time, while doing all the other things that an outdoor educator must do. Outdoor educators must simultaneously and seamlessly keep students safe, provide appropriate instruction, develop experiential learning activities, process experiences and facilitate and monitor interpersonal interactions between group members. It is highly demanding work with potentially serious consequences, if safety is inadequately managed. It is common for facilitators to miss things, for group conflict to emerge, or for tensions between the facilitator and the group to arise. The opportunities for failure are plentiful, and the role of the facilitator is a minefield of potential disasters for anyone prone to perfectionism. If a facilitator becomes overly concerned or nervous about making mistakes, then their level of 'free attention' (Hunter, 2007, p. 51) to concentrate on the difficult task of facilitation is reduced. A heightened fear of failure does not help a facilitator to do their job. The next section of this paper will outline my research, which established how learning to be fully present, developing self-awareness and overcoming fears can help facilitators to be more effective.

Methods

My doctoral research explored the theories and practices of facilitator educators to explicate how emerging facilitators can develop their skills, knowledge and experience. Operating within the interpretivist paradigm, the aim of my study was to examine the theories, practices and values used by facilitator educators in their facilitation programmes. I used a naturalistic inquiry approach because it allowed me to study facilitator educators and emerging facilitators in their natural settings. I collected data through semi-structured interviews and participant observations with 7 facilitator educators (four males and three females), and qualitative survey responses from 104 graduates of their particular programmes. The first round of interviews was guided by a set of questions, which had emerged naturally over the course of an interview. The 35 days of participant observations allowed me to see how the facilitator educators practised; and I focused on the strategies they used to assist the emerging facilitators to develop their skills, knowledge and competence. Follow-up interviews with the facilitator educators were used to discuss emerging themes gleaned from the participant observations. A random sample of the graduates of the facilitator educators' programmes was invited to complete a survey with three open-ended questions. The survey asked graduates what they found most helpful with their development as a facilitator; and the overall response rate was 23.6 per cent. The surveys were used to triangulate the findings but will not feature heavily in the findings discussed in this paper.

A form of *reputational-case sampling* (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) was used to recruit the facilitator educators based on their contribution to the literature and conferences, and their prominence in the field as indicated by their current delivery of facilitator education courses. For convenience, the sample was limited to seven facilitator educators, four from Australia, two from New Zealand, and one from the USA. A brief description of the facilitator educators' backgrounds and involvement in facilitator education is shown in Table 1. The analysis of data utilised three concurrent flows of activity: *data reduction*, *data display* and *conclusion drawing and verification* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Data reduction included writing summaries, coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, making partitions and writing memos. The constant comparison method, conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was then used to identify themes and patterns in the data.

Lincoln and Guba's (2003) *authenticity criteria* were adopted in the study to ensure the findings were trustworthy. Their first criterion, *fairness*, was established by genuinely seeking the views of participants and using member checks to confirm the accuracy of transcribed interviews, field notes summaries and emerging findings. The second criterion of *ontological and educative authenticity* was enhanced by being open and explicit about the methods used, and the reasons for using them. Finally, *catalytic and tactical authenticity* was ensured by encouraging the research participants into action and further discussions. Other strategies, in addition to member checking and triangulation, were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, including *prolonged engagement*, *thick description* and *auditing* (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the research participants when presenting the findings in the next section.

Findings

Numerous themes emerged from the research and in this paper, I will focus on (1) the importance of being and (2) overcoming fears. I will provide selected quotations from a range of the facilitator educators to ensure a rich description of the findings in these two themes.

Table 1. Details of the facilitator educators (at the time of the study).

Facilitator educator (gender accurate pseudonym)	Meg	Jordan	Sara	Max	Tracey	Brendon	Warren
Type of organisation	Australian-based private company	Australian-based private company	New Zealand-based private company	New Zealand-based private company	Australian-based private company	USA-based private company	Australian-based private company
Type of programmes offered	Accredited public programme, total length (20+ days), 10 modules over 6 months	Accredited public programme, total length (20+ days), 10 modules over 6 months	Sequence of eight shorter (2–3 days) public programmes for emerging facilitators	Sequence of eight shorter (2–3 days) public programmes for emerging facilitators	3-day programme public programmes	Wide range of shorter and longer programmes (public and in- house)	Range of shorter public programmes (2–5 days)
Focus of organisation	Facilitator education	Facilitator education	Facilitator education	Facilitator education	Mediation, training, facilitator education	Facilitation consultancy, change management, facilitator education	Facilitation consultancy, facilitator education
Experience as a facilitator educator	10 years	10 years	10 years	4 years	10 years	15 years	15 years

The importance of being

The facilitator educators in my study emphasised the importance of being *being-with*, *being real* or *being in the moment*. The essence of this theme is that effective facilitation is about more than *doing* things with groups. Jordan and Meg emphasised *being-with* which they described as the ‘conscious act of connecting with others. Being-with is about being aware of your own sense of self and at the same time sensing the self of another’ (course materials, p. 34). At one stage of a programme, Jordan countered the common view of technical facilitation by suggesting to the emerging facilitator that ‘it is not about doing something clever, it’s about being with [another emerging facilitator] in your spirit and heart’ (field notes, programme day 4).

Meg explained to her emerging facilitators that the ‘key to good facilitation is about being real, being yourself’ (interview notes). Warren explained that ‘when people experience others as people that is all it takes’ (field notes), suggesting that good facilitation is not about activities but rather it is more about helping participants to make real contact with each other. Hence, being authentic is not only a goal for emerging facilitators because it helps their facilitation but it is also beneficial because it role-models an effective form of interpersonal functioning for the future recipients of their facilitation efforts. This focus on being real was one of the hallmarks of Rogers’ (1983, 1989b) person-centred approaches to teaching and counselling.

In a discussion with emerging facilitators on Tracey’s programme, they agreed that it was much more professional to be transparent about our needs as facilitators than to pretend they do not exist. This is also congruent with Ghais’ (2005) call for facilitators to be more authentic; and, in her experience, ‘one of the most effective interventions I can make is to admit when a meeting is not going well and I don’t know how to get it back on track’ (p. 15). However, this works against the typical demand that facilitators sometimes place on themselves, which is to know how to deal with every situation perfectly and immediately. In contrast, Ghais’ view was that being comfortable with your shortcomings can improve a facilitator’s effectiveness.

Meg and Jordan teach emerging facilitators to be comfortable with being in the moment by encouraging them to be fully ‘present’ with the group so that they can respond to group issues in ‘real time’, rather than feeling they must implement some predetermined plan (Jordan, field notes, day 1). Meg explains in her course materials, ‘A facilitator doesn’t know what to say in advance. You listen for what needs to be spoken to facilitate the group. This is what you speak “in the moment”’ (p. 48). Jordan claimed, ‘the trick is to stay in the present, don’t get tempted to go into the future, you can only facilitate in the present’ (field notes, programme day 4). Meg and Jordan’s perspective is consistent with Ringer’s (2002) goal of helping facilitators to ‘become more comfortable with the experience of not knowing exactly what is going on, but remaining fully present in the experience’ (p. 19).

Overcoming fears

The primary fear that emerging facilitators often discussed in the programmes I observed was the ‘fear of failure’, especially the failure to make the right intervention at the right time. This is consistent with the state of *immobilised awareness*, which Kirk and Broussine (2000) stated occurs when a facilitator is fearful of getting it wrong or fearful of making a difficult intervention. Emerging facilitators regularly expressed frustration and disappointment with their own mistakes and imperfections when trying to facilitate. This was even though the facilitator educators promoted a different perspective on mistakes and failures.

We never get to the point that we are so experienced that we never stuff up [and] good facilitation is about being robust enough to make mistakes ... humility is a significant characteristic of a facilitator and the opposite of being required to be the expert. (Meg, interview notes)

As mentioned previously, Warren not only talked about tolerance for mistakes but he also role-modelled openness when dealing with the awkwardness of recovering from a mistake. Warren, it seemed, was comfortable to be quiet for 5–10 s in order to refocus and start again. He explained further

If I get really stuck, I just say, 'I am really stuck,' and I suggest we back away from it. I then usually ask for suggestions. If there are no suggestions, which gain agreement, I may then ask participants to join me in collecting information and analysing our process. (follow up email)

Tracey took a different approach to managing the quest for perfectionism in emerging facilitators, by suggesting that 'it is okay to operate with a limp, however, if you want to "run marathons," you may have to deal with it' (field notes, programme day 2). Her point was that although perfection is not a prerequisite to effective facilitation, if emerging facilitators want to be able to facilitate more effectively in difficult situations (run marathons), then they may need to do the inner work necessary to eliminate debilitating imperfections (limps) in the future. This is consistent with Mindell's (1995) call for facilitators to embrace the inner work required to overcome their ineffectiveness while acknowledging the debilitating effects of seeking perfection.

The facilitator educators described the 'fear of intervening' as one of the most impacting internal fears confronting emerging facilitators. Meg indicated that emerging facilitators regularly find it difficult to get up the courage to make the required intervention when working with a group. Tracey used the term 'decatastrophising' (field notes, day 2) to describe the process of learning to deal with these, often irrational, fears. She explained

Many participants are fearful that they will make an absolute mess of things, that it will be disastrous, that they will look stupid or be unable to cope. Recognizing that this just doesn't happen much is crucial to debunking that myth. (field notes, day 2)

Tracey concurred with the early work of Clance and Innes (1978) on the debilitating effect of the *imposter syndrome* which causes unfounded feelings of inadequacy, particularly for women. More recent research and writing (Chapman, 2017; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Mercer, 2016) indicate that men can also experience similar levels of self-doubt and fear of failure. However, men are more likely to 'push through the fear while women more commonly pull back' (Mercer, 2016, para. 5, loc. 909/3147). In summary, this section has focused on two aspects of emerging facilitators' experience: the importance of being and overcoming fears. Emerging facilitators put unneeded and unhelpful pressure on themselves when they overemphasise the need to perform perfectly. However, if facilitators do not aim for perfection, some may be uncertain about what they should aim for. The facilitator educators in my study recommended that facilitators aim to establish greater authenticity by working on being present with the group and improving self-awareness.

Discussion: authenticity through self-awareness

In the final section of this paper, I will outline some tools or frameworks which can help facilitators to practise greater self-awareness, particularly when managing difficult group situations. These tools or frameworks have been chosen for inclusion here because they were utilised by the facilitator educators in my study to help their emerging facilitators improve their effectiveness. The frameworks, which are summarised in Table 2, and discussed in the sections that follow, include the interior council (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006), voice dialogue (Stone & Stone, 1989), community of selves (Neville, 2005; Ochre, 2013) and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

The interior council

Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) outline nine personal disciplines that emerging facilitators should master to be effective. Their book is not a 'how to' book but rather is concerned with what

Table 2. Summary of the frameworks and tools recommended for improving facilitator self-awareness.

	The interior council	Voice dialogue	Community of selves	Mindfulness
Key authors	Jenkins and Jenkins (2006)	Stone and Stone (1989, 2011)	Ochre (2013), Neville (2005)	Kabat-Zinn (2009)
Key ideas	Our minds are filled with sayings, ideas and advice. The anthropomorphised source of this advice can be likened to advisors in an interior council	Voice dialogue is a method used to increase conscious awareness of the subpersonalities that operate within us	We all have a community of selves inside us that influences our thoughts, feelings and decisions. Some of those selves may operate outside our levels of conscious awareness	Mindfulness involves paying attention, on purpose, in the moment, non-judgementally. The improved level of awareness created can improve personal functioning
How it improves self-awareness?	The interior council framework provides a language to describe and work with one's internal dialogue. An increased awareness of our advisors can help us to choose more carefully which advice is prudent and which may be unhelpful	Voice dialogue avoids being critical or controlling and provides a way to experience our different subpersonalities. Ultimately, the goal is to develop an 'aware ego' that performs the executive function of the psyche	Throughout our lives, we are socialised to subvert or privilege different members of our community of selves. Through non-judgemental reflection, we can improve our functioning by learning how our selves consciously and unconsciously shape our emotions, thinking and actions	Mindfulness can help us to notice what is going on in the moment without negative judgements or self-deprecation. With practice, people can learn to respond to their environment more calmly and make decisions that are more carefully considered
Application to group facilitation in outdoor education	An improved understanding of the advisors in a facilitator's interior council can empower the facilitator to understand the thoughts and feelings he/she encounters when facilitating—particularly in challenging situations	Voice dialogue can increase our awareness and understanding of a facilitator's internal dialogue. The concept of an overriding 'aware ego' provides choices about which voices to listen to and which to ignore when facilitating. The often-damaging role of the 'inner critic' is made explicit	By exploring personal histories and participating in inner work, facilitators can become more aware of their conscious and unconscious (shadow) selves. This non-judgemental reflection and exploration can help the facilitator to be more awake and use their 'wise one' to facilitate more effectively	Mindfulness helps facilitators to become more aware in difficult situations, which might occur when working with groups. By avoiding unhelpful judgemental analysis, the facilitator can create the mental clarity required to consider options and make facilitation choices which are better informed and more effective

happens inside the leader and how he or she makes decisions and functions, as a whole person. They explained

The most difficult thing any facilitative leader can do is master himself or herself. Every leader experiences doubt, anxiety, cynicism, and his or her own dark side. Facilitative leaders need to restore their personal energy, maintain respect for both colleagues and themselves, find new sources of ideas and inspiration, and battle the human propensity toward self-limitation, caution, mediocrity, and dependency. (p. 1)

One of their nine disciplines, called *The Interior Council*, is very relevant to this paper. Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) argued that our minds are filled with 'ideas, sayings, advice and images' (p. 147) that help us to navigate through life. It is as though we have a council of advisors inside our heads offering us advice. Some of those advisors are helpful and offer great wisdom. Some do not. The key to successful facilitation is to 'be aware of the voices and to select which ones you will pay attention to and which you will ignore' (p. 147).

Our interior council shapes our thoughts, our feelings, influences our actions and can give us courage or rob us of our effectiveness. Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) argue that we have a choice to deepen our relationship with our interior council or we can ignore it. They suggested that managing our interior council starts by noticing the impact that some interpersonal interactions have on us. The next step requires the facilitator to listening to the advice being offered, ideally without defensiveness. Jenkins and Jenkins recommend engaging in an internal dialogue with the interior council, and then deciding whether the advice from that member of the council is embraced or set aside. They explained that as you develop,

a profound appreciation of these internal advisors, then you learn to ignore those who dehumanize you or others, and pay attention to the ones who give you courage to be more human ... who increase your capacity to serve, and offer you the wisdom, skills, and capacity to inspire. (p. 155)

When I was first introduced to this way of managing my own internal dialogue, I had great difficulty trying to do all this mental activity in real time when facilitating a challenging group. I found that some of the required internal processing needed to occur later, when there was time for reflection and analysis. However, just the act of noticing that certain members of my interior council were offering advice was empowering. Over time, and with practice, it became clear that some of my council members were regular interrupters and their advice was not helpful. I have now learned to dismiss some of their mental interruptions in real time, which limits their impact on my facilitation practice. Jenkins and Jenkins also provide several strategies to help emerging facilitators to better know and understand their interior council, including writing them letters and discussing our experiences of them with others.

Voice dialogue

One of the methods used by several facilitator educators in my study to help emerging facilitators to manage themselves is called *voice dialogue*. Developed by Stone and Stone (1989), voice dialogue provides a method to facilitate the 'evolution of consciousness' (p. 16) by learning how the subpersonalities operate within us. Stone and Stone explained, 'without this understanding, we are in the powerless position of watching different subpersonalities drive our psychological car while we sit in the back seat or, worse yet, hide in the trunk' (p. 16). Stone and Stone (1989) argued that their voice dialogue method

has proven to be a dramatically effective and frequently humorous tool for igniting and expanding the evolution of consciousness by helping us to explore our subpersonalities, expand our awareness, and clarify the role of our egos in maintaining psychological health. (p. 48)

The voice dialogue method facilitates the evolution of consciousness by working through three stages: (1) developing awareness without being overly judgemental or controlling, (2) experiencing our different *selves*, (3) developing an *aware ego* which performs the executive function of the psyche. A critical feature of this approach is the honouring of all selves to provide greater choice, because as Stone and Stone argued, 'the selves we do not honour grow inside of us in unconscious ways, gaining power and authority' (p. 25). The voice dialogue method provides emerging facilitators with a tool to explore some of their ineffective, internal conversations.

Two of the facilitator educators in my study (Meg and Max) used a technique called *sociodrama*, first developed by Moreno (Fox, 1987), to implement the voice dialogue method. They would help emerging facilitators to explore the dialogue going on inside their heads by getting them to coach other members of the group to act out the roles of the unhelpful selves. When this process is skilfully facilitated, it helps to make explicit the emerging facilitator's negative internal dialogue. With the help of the facilitator educator, the emerging facilitator was encouraged to voice responses to the unhelpful selves (being acted out by their peers). By making this otherwise internal process explicit, the emerging facilitators could learn how to manage their inner dialogues

more effectively. This approach addresses the problem that negative internal-dialogue has the most power when it occurs in secret. The simple act of exposing the negative internal dialogue robs it of much of its power and hold over the emerging facilitator.

One of the most damaging voices commonly experienced by emerging facilitators is the *inner critic*. Stone and Stone (2011) explain that the inner critic intends to protect us from being shamed or hurt and to help us succeed and be accepted by others. The problem is that the inner critic does not always know when to rest, which can result in a barrage of judgemental voices that can make a facilitator overly defensive and sensitive to criticism. Further, Stone and Stone (2011) suggest that the inner critic may bring wisdom that needs to be heard, but the inner critic should not be in the driver's seat. The aware ego should be in the driver's seat.

Community of selves

In my study, one facilitator educator introduced a 'Community of Selves' model to help emerging facilitators better understand some of the thoughts and feelings they experience when attempting to facilitate groups. Her model was not only based on the similar ideas to the interior council and voice dialogue frameworks but also explored unconscious processes in facilitation settings by drawing on the work of Freud and Jung. According to Meg, we have an inner community of selves that informs and guides the way we interact with the world in different contexts. At some level, all selves contribute and play a part, but we also learn to control selves because we feel they need to be managed or subverted; and, depending on how we have lived our lives, we learn which of our selves to 'stick out the most' (field notes, day 3).

Like Stone and Stone (1989), Meg also used the analogy of a bus with our many selves functioning like passengers. When we are facilitating, each of the passengers on our bus has the potential to contribute wisdom to how our bus should be driven; but no single self is the best one to be driving our bus. It is our 'wise one' (Meg, field notes, day 3) who needs to be able to listen to the contribution that each of the selves brings, hear the wisdom those selves bring, without allowing them to dominate or take over the driving of the bus. Her approach is consistent with the conceptual approach used in Stone and Stone's (1989) voice dialogue method, and the aware ego performs a similar role as her wise one.

Several facilitator educators encouraged emerging facilitators to do the inner work necessary to process our reactions to group dynamics when they are learning to facilitate. This call for innerwork is consistent with the approach recommended by Mindell (1995) and Ghais (2005). In her programmes, Meg emphasised the need to be awake, and she used this term to describe the state of being more aware of what is going on both inside the facilitator as well as in the group. From a psychodynamic perspective, the choice for facilitators is 'not whether or not to "allow" unconscious processes to occur in our groups because they will occur anyway. The choice becomes whether or not we deliberately work with unconscious processes in our groups' (Ringer, 2002, p. 280).

In the early twentieth century, Freud (1915) believed that the contents and functions of the unconscious were essentially nasty and unhelpful. However, his rigid view of unconscious processes spurred others to develop ideas of their own. Jung, for example, was more open-minded to the possibility that the unconscious could serve constructive purposes (Neville, 2005). Jung also contributed by developing the notion of archetypes, which Neville described as 'typical and universal "modes of apprehension," which appear as images charged with great meaning and power—images which exert great influence on our individual and collective behaviour' (p. 125). In the context of teacher education, Neville (2005) explored the role of unconscious processes for teachers. Like Jenkins and Jenkins (2006), Neville acknowledges the role that our past experiences and relationships have in shaping who we are today. However, Neville (2005) also explained that there is another side of the teacher's personality, the *shadow*, which includes all sorts of repressed experiences and events, in an interrelated cluster of unconscious contents. At times these shadow

selves can be incompatible with the conscious self. Both the persona and the shadow are examples of what Jung called *complexes*, and they may develop after a traumatic event or by gradual accumulation. For example, a teacher, repeatedly exposed to criticism as a child, may develop a criticism complex, which makes the person extremely sensitive about the way he or she receives and interprets feedback from students, colleagues or supervisors. At times these complexes can cause significant disruption to effective interpersonal functioning, but

for the remainder of teachers, whose pathology remains at the normal level, complexes are not much more than a nuisance. They cause occasional embarrassments, and wreck a relationship here and there, but a certain degree of watchfulness can prevent them from dominating our lives. If we are attentive, we can even learn what our complexes are and do something about them. (Neville, 2005, pp. 130–131)

Ochre (2013) provided some suggestions to emerging facilitators on how they can manage the internal dialogue if it is impeding their ability to function effectively. She recommended getting to know the selves that speak to us and recognising the gift that they each offer. Although that gift was relevant and appropriate at some time in our life, it is possible that the advice no longer serves the same well-intentioned purpose. Appreciating the selves in this way establishes a less adversarial relationship with our selves. This in turn makes it easier for our wise one who 'is compassionate, has access to the wisdom of all the selves, and has the capacity to make wise decisions' (Ochre, 2013, p. 40) to do his/her job.

Mindfulness

At the time of my doctoral research, the concept and practice of mindfulness had not yet experienced the surge of interest it enjoys today. The facilitator educators in my study did not discuss or teach mindfulness, yet their approaches to improving self-awareness were very consistent with the principles and practices of mindfulness. The discussion of mindfulness is included in this paper because it is relevant and because it has been the focus of empirical research within the fields of outdoor education and teacher education.

Mindfulness is based on Buddhist meditative practices and gained mainstream acceptance in Western society through the work of Kabat-Zinn (2003), who defined mindfulness as 'the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding experience moment by moment' (p. 144). Mindfulness has become a popular inclusion in many teacher education programmes; and research suggests that it can improve a teacher's self-awareness, enhance their resilience, improve well-being, reduce stress, reduce burn-out, create warmer and more supportive learning environments and improve teacher–student relationships (Grant, 2017; Kyte, 2016; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Soloway, Poulin, & Mackenzie, 2011).

Thus, the practice of mindfulness offers significant benefits for the facilitator. First, it teaches us to notice what is going on in the present moment non-judgementally. The debilitating effects of self-doubt, caused by an overzealous inner critic, experienced by a facilitator contending with a challenging group or situation, can be neutralised by learning to be less judgemental in our observations. Second, mindfulness encourages facilitators to be present in the moment. Good facilitation is demanding on our attention, and if we allow ourselves to get triggered by events or group members when facilitating, we are no longer fully present and our level of free attention is diminished (Hunter, 2007). Third, mindfulness teaches us that we have a choice.

Mindfulness does not necessarily bring immediate change to challenging circumstances in our lives and classrooms; however, it does provide us with the freedom to choose the way we respond to whatever comes our way, and that is incredibly powerful and liberating—for teachers, for students, for all of us. (Soloway et al., 2011, p. 225)

There is no reason to conclude that facilitators cannot experience the same positive outcomes that teachers have reported in the studies mentioned earlier. To date, mindfulness training has not featured strongly in outdoor leadership texts or research on outdoor education. One exception is a study that

explored mindfulness with 178 summer camp staff in the USA, aged 16–46 ($M = 20.99$) (Gillard, Roark, Nyaga, & Bialeschki, 2011). The research was focused on testing a modified version of the existing *Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale* (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and Gillard et al. (2011) found that the tool could be a useful resource to improve mindfulness in summer school staff training programmes, because ‘when staff members are alert and aware to their own feelings and emotional states, they are better equipped to self-regulate, which can ultimately enhance the quality of the experience for participants’ (p. 93). Further, the literature supports the efficacy of mindfulness techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation, reflection activities, verbalising mental problem-solving processes, sensory exercises and body scan exercises (Gillard et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Kyte, 2016; Trube, 2017).

Conclusions

The facilitator educators in my study highlighted the negative impacts created when facilitators focus too heavily on perfectly performing their role. There was agreement that the pursuit of perfection can become a distraction and deterrent from the more important task of being fully present with the group. The alternative, suggested by the facilitator educators, is for facilitators to focus on being authentic—mistakes and all. This approach is consistent with an approach to parenting called ‘good enough parenting’ first proposed by Winnicott (1964), an English psychoanalyst and paediatrician.

Winnicott (1964) first proposed the idea of the good enough mother more than 50 years ago as part of a defence for typical parents against the growing threat of interference from professionals. Like the facilitator educators in my study, he countered the idealisation of the parenting role. In his view, it was perfectly normal for parents to be less than perfect and that it was essential for a child to overcome the disillusionment, which he or she may have, regarding his or her parents. In more recent times, Wake (2012) affirmed the challenge of parenting in the twenty-first century, and he noted that self-doubt and diminished confidence is common for parents. He sought to help parents see themselves as ‘good enough’ parents and wanted to help them avoid the perils of trying to be ‘super’ parents.

The focus of this paper may not be relevant to all facilitators. We all come from different backgrounds, have experienced different challenges through our lives, have different personalities and process past and current experiences differently. For those facilitators who have also experienced the awkwardness of feeling inadequate or fearful about their effectiveness as a facilitator, the frameworks and tools presented in this paper may provide a means to develop greater self-awareness. For some facilitators, this may involve little more than reading more about the frameworks, reflecting on their practice, and applying some of the strategies for managing their internal dialogue. For others, some sessions with a counsellor or psychologist may help to do the inner work of exploring the underlying causes of the difficulties in facilitating difficult groups, which may surface inside them. It is not a sign of weakness to get professional help. In fact, seeking help models the commitment to improvement and development that we hope our participants will demonstrate.

The four frameworks or tools outlined in the previous section are variations on the same theme. Negative self-talk can sabotage our best intentions as group facilitators by reducing the levels of free attention which are needed to facilitate well. The message in this paper is simple: there are strategies that can be used to manage negative self-talk; outdoor education programmes do not need perfect facilitators; rather, they need more ‘good-enough facilitators’ who can be authentic and fully present. However, more empirical research in this area of facilitator education would be beneficial. It would be helpful to determine if worrying less about facilitating perfectly, and focusing more on being fully present, leads to improvements in a facilitators’ perceptions of their own effectiveness.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Glyn Thomas is a senior lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia, and coordinates two programmes: one for pre-service physical education teachers and one for future outdoor education leaders. His teaching and research interests focus on the facilitation of experiential education, facilitator education and outdoor/environmental fieldwork pedagogies.

References

- Black, R., & Bricker, K. S. (Eds.). (2015). *Adventure programming and travel for the 21st century*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822–848.
- Chapman, A. (2017). Using the assessment process to overcome imposter syndrome in mature students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(2), 112–119.
- Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications Inc.
- Egan, G. (2002). *The skilled helper: A problem-management and opportunity-development approach to helping* (7th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Ewert, A., & Sibthorp, J. (2014). *Outdoor adventure education: Foundations, theory and research*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Fox, J. (Ed.). (1987). *The essential Moreno: Writings on psychodrama, group method and spontaneity by J. L. Moreno, MD*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, Inc.
- Freud, S. (1915). The unconscious. *Standard Edition*, 14, 159–214.
- Gass, M. A., Gillis, L., & Russell, K. C. (2012). *Adventure therapy: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Ghais, S. (2005). *Extreme facilitation: Guiding groups through controversy and complexity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gillard, A., Roark, M. F., Nyaga, L. R. K., & Bialeschki, M. D. (2011). Measuring mindfulness in summer camp staff. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34(1), 87–95.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goleman, D. (1996). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Grant, K. C. (2017). From teaching to being: The qualities of a mindful teacher. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 147–152.
- Hogan, C. F. (2002). *Understanding facilitation: Theory and principles*. London: Kogan Page.
- Hunter, D. (2007). *The art of facilitation: The essentials for leading great meetings and creating group synergy*. Auckland: Random House.
- Hunter, D., Bailey, A., & Taylor, B. (1995). *The art of facilitation*. Auckland, New Zealand: Tandem Press.
- Jenkins, J. C., & Jenkins, M. R. (2006). *The 9 disciplines of a facilitator: Leading groups by transforming yourself*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2009). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York, NY: Hachette Books.
- Kirk, P., & Broussine, M. (2000). The politics of facilitation. *Journal of Workplace Learning: Employee Counselling Today*, 12(1), 13–22.
- Knights, D., & Clarke, C. A. (2014). It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work. *Organization Studies*, 35(3), 335–357.
- Kyte, D. (2016). Toward a sustainable sense of self in teaching and teacher education: Sustainable happiness and well-being through mindfulness. *McGill Journal of Education*, 51(3), 1143–1162.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2003). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed., pp. 253–291). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martin, B., Breunig, M., Wagstaff, M., & Goldenberg, M. (2017). *Outdoor leadership: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M. L., Griffin, M. L., Biegall, G., Roach, A., ... Saltzman, A. (2012). Integrating mindfulness training into K-12 education: Fostering the resilience of teachers and students. *Mindfulness*, 3, 291–307.

- Mercer, S. (2016). *Liberate leadership: How the imposter syndrome undermines leadership capability and what to do about it* (2nd ed.). Sydney, Australia: Suzanne Mercier. (Kindle edition).
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Mindell, A. (1995). *Sitting in the fire: Large group transformation using conflict and diversity*. Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press.
- Neville, B. (2005). *Educating Psyche: Emotion, imagination and the unconscious in learning*. Melbourne: Flat Chat Press.
- Ochre, G. (2013). *Getting our act together: How to harness the power of groups*. Melbourne: Arena.
- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (2017). *Effective leadership in adventure programming* (3rd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishing.
- Prouty, D., Panicucci, J., & Collinson, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Adventure education: Theory and applications*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Ringer, M. (2002). *Group action: The dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Rogers, C. R. (1983). *Freedom to learn for the 80s*. London: Charles E. Merrill.
- Rogers, C. R. (1989a). The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning. In V. L. Henderson & H. Kirschenbaum (Eds.), *The Carl Rogers reader* (pp. 304–322). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. R. (1989b). Personal thoughts on teaching and learning. In V. L. Henderson & H. Kirschenbaum (Eds.), *The Carl Rogers reader* (pp. xvi, 526). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Simpson, S. (2003). *The leader who is hardly known: Self-less teaching from the Chinese tradition* (1st ed.). Oklahoma City, OK: Wood 'N' Barnes.
- Soloway, G. B., Poulin, P., & Mackenzie, C. S. (2011). Preparing new teachers for the full catastrophe of the twenty-first-century classroom: Integrating mindfulness training into initial teacher education. In A. Cohan & A. Honigsfeld (Eds.), *Breaking the mold of preservice and inservice teacher education: Innovative and successful practices for the twenty-first century* (pp. 219–225). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Stone, H., & Stone, S. (1989). *Embracing ourselves: Voice dialogue manual*. Novato, CA: Nataraj.
- Stone, H., & Stone, S. (2011). *Embracing your inner critic: Turning self-criticism into a creative asset*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. (Kindle edition).
- Stremba, B., & Bisson, C. A. (Eds.). (2009). *Teaching adventure education theory: Best practices*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Thomas, G. J. (2008a). Facilitate first thyself: The person-centered dimension of facilitator education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 31(2), 168–188.
- Thomas, G. J. (2008b). Preparing facilitators for experiential education: The role of intentionality and intuition. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 8(1), 3–20.
- Trube, B. (2017). Mindfulness practices in mentoring and teaching. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 159–167.
- Wake, A. (2012). *The 'good enough' parent: How to provide for your child's social and emotional development*. Maryborough, VIC, Australia: Author. (Kindle edition).
- Winnicott, D. W. (1964). *The child, the family and the outside world*. London, England: Pelican Books.