

Chapter 29

Six Generations of Facilitation Skills

Simon Priest

eXperientia

Michael A. Gass

University of New Hampshire

Introduction

Since reflection is the key to deeper learning that leads to more lasting change in adventure programming, anything that a “facilitator” does to enhance reflection before, during, or after an experience is called *facilitation*. Facilitation comes in many forms and its evolution can be traced through six distinct generations of skills. These six generations are summarized in Table 29.1 in order of occurrence (about every decade or so since the start of recent adventure programming history) and in order of sophistication, complexity, and difficulty (Priest and Gass, 1997).

This chapter examines each of these generations in more detail and provides examples using the common group initiative called *Spider's Web*. Spider's Web is elastic chord strung between two posts to look like a giant web with openings large enough to pass a person through. *Rules: Group members should be passed through different openings, from one side to the other, without touching the strands. Contact with a strand wakes the spider, which bites and causes one to start over. A repeat contact sends the whole group back to the beginning.*

Six Generations

Letting the experience speak for itself is a method found in numerous adventure programs where clients are left to sort out their own personal insights. When properly sequenced and well-designed, the inherently enriching qualities of adventure activities serve to lead clients into their own insights and discoveries through “learning and doing.” This approach is fine, provided that identified or prescriptive intrapersonal and interpersonal goals are not sought. Clients may well have a good time and possibly become

Table 29.1 Six Generations of Facilitation Skills

Decade	Generation	Explanation
1940s	Letting the experience speak for itself	Learning and doing
1950s	Speaking on behalf of the experience	Learning by telling
1960s	Funneling or debriefing the experience	Learning through reflection
1970s	Front-loading (by direct method) the experience	Direction with reflection
1980s	Framing (by isomorphic method) the experience	Reinforcement in reflection
1990s	Front-loading (by indirect method) the experience	Redirection before reflection

proficient at new skills, but they are less likely to have learned anything about themselves, how they relate with others, or how to resolve certain issues confronting them in their lives. In letting the experience speak for itself, the leader would *not* look to add any insights regarding the Spider's Web exercise when the experience was completed. If any comments were made, they might pertain to how much fun the experience was and encourage the group to move on and try the next event: "That was great! Good job! Now let's try something new and different."

In an effort to enhance programming efforts, several programs have implemented the second generational approach of *speaking on behalf of the experience*. Here the leader (often in the role of an expert) interprets the experience for the clients, informing them of what they had learned and how they should apply their new knowledge in the future. This second approach of "learning by telling" can be well-suited to role plays and simulations where results are predictable and reproducible time and time again. However, in the adventure experience, groups bring unique behavioral history to bear on the way they act under stress. The results from these experiences also seem to be more unpredictable and unique. Due to this uncertainty, client learning is generally quite varied and personal. Telling individuals what they received from an experience can cause problems by disempowering and alienating them, or can possibly disconnect the leader from clients, thus hampering their future learning opportunities.

In speaking for the experience, the leader would provide the group with feedback about their general behaviors after the activity was completed: what they did well, what they need to work on, and what they learned from the exercise. Examples of such statements might include:

- You've learned to cooperate by virtue of working together and succeeding.
- Your communication is poor, everyone is talking and no one seems to be listening to anyone's ideas.
- The level of trust seems to be improving, since no one appeared to worry about being picked up by the others.
- You could have benefited from having a coordinator for this activity!

One solution to the problems arising from telling has been to encourage "learning through reflection" styles that enable clients to discover learning after the experience. As clients bring up issues to work on or state personal commitments to change, they are more likely to follow through if they possess ownership over such issues. By asking questions, instead of telling, ownership is much more likely. This idea has given rise to the third generational approach of *debriefing the experience*. Here clients are asked to reflect on each adventure activity and discuss

points of learning that they believe took place. Obviously, if an experience is to have true meaning for clients or if they are going to make use of new learning, then they should be invested in the experience and prepared to bear responsibility for their actions or how they functioned during the experience. In this model, clients learn under the guidance of a questioning leader, who helps the group members to discover their own learning. Although numerous methods of debriefing exist, the most common approach in North America is the group discussion.

One example of a successful debriefing approach is *funneling* the use of sequenced questions to funnel learning from the broad experience to the narrow change. In debriefing the experience, the leader would foster a group discussion concerning the details, analysis, and evaluation of the group's behavior following activity completion. Sample questions of this funneling style might include:

- What happened?
- What was the impact of this?
- How did that make you feel?
- What did you learn from this?
- What aspects for this activity were metaphors of your life? and
- What will you do differently next time? in this order.

Since reflection is typically accomplished after the experience, a number of leaders have concluded that benefit may be added by directing the clients before the experience even begins. This kind of thinking has led to the fourth generational approach of *directly front-loading the experience*. *Front-loading* is a term used for highlighting (or loading) the learning prior to (or in front of) the experience. In most adventure activities, leaders typically brief clients before the experience by explaining how the activity should work (tasks, rules or safety concerns), and then debrief them afterwards by guiding reflective discussions. However, in the fourth generation, front-loading is held just prior to engaging in the adventure as a kind of extra "prebriefing" where the leader emphasizes several key points, such as:

1. *revisit*—what behaviors or performances were promised and learned from the last activity,
2. *objectives*—the aims of the activity and what can be learned or gained from this experience,
3. *motivation*—why experiencing the activity might be important and how it relates to life,
4. *function*—what behaviors will help bring about success and how to optimize these, and
5. *dysfunction*—what behaviors will hinder success and how to overcome these barriers.

In essence, the clients are focused toward certain distinct learning outcomes assessed as determined by the leader. By loading the learning up front, debriefing simply becomes "direction with reflection" and a reemphasis of learning rather than a reactive discussion as in earlier generations. In front-loading the experience, the leader would introduce Spider's Web with the same logistical briefing as usual. In addition to this, the leader would add a series of questions to focus the learning prior to the activity:

- What do you think this exercise might teach you?
- Why is learning this important?
- How might your learning help you in the future? and
- Do you recall from past exercises what each of you wanted to work on in situations like this?

Since this front-loaded prebriefing has already covered many of the topics usually held in debriefing, the concluding discussion can concentrate solely on changes.

A fifth generation of facilitation involves *isomorphically framing the experience* and is still a relatively uncommon approach in adventure programming. Recall that metaphors are the analogous connections made by clients between the adventure experience and their real lives. *Isomorphs* are the parallel structures added to the adventure experience by the leader so clients are encouraged to make certain metaphoric linkages. For example, when leaders use the word *marriage* to describe a canoe, they are purposefully creating an isomorph with the intention of linking the skills of tandem paddling to the difficulties of living with a partner. When strong linkages are meaningful and relevant, client motivation is increased and transfer of learning is usually enhanced. If the leader can "frame" (or introduce) an activity with several isomorphs, which paint a mirror image of reality for the clients, then any changes they express in the similar adventure experience may match the change desired for daily living. When this framing is successfully accomplished, transfer will also be effective, since the dynamics and processes of the two experiences will not be that different. Again, only a little debriefing is needed afterwards, becoming "reinforcement in reflection," since clients discuss the close similarities and immediately see the obvious connections (if a strategy works here, it can work in real life too).

In isomorphic framing, the leader would address the briefing in terms of the similar structures between the adventure and corresponding present life experiences of the client. For example, with a group working in a company warehouse, the Spider's Web might be transformed into:

a distribution network (the web) through which goods and services (team members) are passed from the warehouse (one side) to

the customer's many outlets (other side). Passage takes place along unique routings (openings) and contact with the network (brushing up against a strand) damages the goods and services which means they need to be returned to the warehouse. If damaged goods and services are purposely passed on to the customer, then all shipments will be refused by the customer and returned to the warehouse to be fixed and shipped again!

If this form of briefing is close to a mirror image of the workplace and current reality of this organization, then the debriefing need only focus on reinforcing the needs of the organization that were attained by accomplishing the activity and on those that weren't achieved due to particular shortcomings.

Even more rare than any other generation of facilitation are instances involving *indirectly front-loading the experience*. It is used only as a last resort: when all other approaches have failed, only in the clients' best interests, and for the purpose of addressing continuing problematic issues. For example, the harder a client tries to eliminate an unwanted issue, the more it occurs; or the more a client tries to attain a desired result, the more elusive this result becomes. Indirect front-loading can take several *paradoxical* forms: (1) double binding, (2) symptom prescription, (3) symptom displacement, (4) illusion of alternatives, and (5) proactive reframing.

An example of double binding for a problematic group with sexist behaviors follows:

Most . . . groups who attempt the Spider's Web tend to do it in a particular way. At the beginning, they mill around a bit with lots of people offering their suggestions. After some time a couple of dominant males tend to start the group off. They get a few men to the other side of the web and then throw the women through like sacks of potatoes and often with embarrassing remarks about female anatomy disguised as humor. Then the same group of dominant males decides how to do the hardest part [of the task] which is getting the last few people through. Afterwards, during the discussion of the exercise, everyone agrees that the leadership was more-or-less sexist and there are various emotional reactions to that. There are other ways to do the Spider's Web. . . .

Stated in this way, the front-loaded double bind is positive and a win-win situation is created. If the group chooses to perform the task in a sexist manner, then they "win" because their true behaviors will become painfully

obvious and the awareness or denial of the group's sexist behavior will be heightened for the debriefing. If the group chooses to perform in a nonsexist and equitable manner, then they also "win" since they have clearly demonstrated that they can act differently and may continue to do so in the future. One way brings dysfunction to the forefront of discussion, while the other breaks old habits and provides new learning. With this indirect front-loading technique, the leader has positively "bound" this resistant client group into a unique learning opportunity. The approach is one of "redirection before reflection" as the debriefing part is simply an opportunity to punctuate key lessons gained before and during the experience rather than after it.

Conclusion

Recall that adventure programming can be categorized on the basis of whether the primary focus for learning and change emphasizes feelings, thinking, functional behavior, or dysfunctional behavior. In *recreational* adventure programs, where having fun, learning a new skill, and being entertained is the purpose, the first and second generations tend to be the most appropriate facilitational approaches. In *educational* adventure programs, where understanding new concepts, enriching the knowledge of old concepts, and generating an awareness of the need for change is the purpose, the third generation is the most commonly used method of facilitation. In *developmental* ad-

venture programs, where improving functional behavior and training new and different behaviors is the purpose, third, fourth and fifth generations appear to fit best. In *therapeutic* adventure programs, where reducing dysfunctional behavior and conditioning less negative behaviors is the purpose, the fifth and sixth generations are the most effective techniques.

Outdoor leaders have a responsibility to their adventure programs (which provide a service) and to their customers (who consume that service) to be clear on the level of facilitation they can provide. For example, the reputation and credibility of the profession suffers when a customer requests therapy (with the intent of getting specific prescriptive behavioral change for the clients), but the program provides education (with a more general focus of learning new ideas), and the leader offers recreation (with little or no facilitation)! Anyone using these six generations of facilitation has the responsibility to consider the type of program he or she can offer, which generation is most appropriate to that program and how his or her choice of approach will impact his or her clients. Failure to do so can damage the reputation of the entire profession.

Reference

Priest, S., and Gass, M. A. (1997). *Effective leadership in adventure programming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.