"Let's Go Round the Circle:" How Verbal Facilitation Can Function as a Means of Direct Instruction

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In this chapter, the term facilitation refers to the act of conducting a verbal discussion prior to, or after an activity, with the aim of encouraging students to reflect on what will, or has been, learned from experiences. An overview of the role of the leader/facilitator, as advocated in some widely available adventure education texts, is discussed. This is followed by an outline of the methodological approach that guided the research project. The analysis section highlights how the leader was observed directing and orchestrating the direction of talk through the "common sense" and everyday ways of conducting verbal facilitation sessions. The primary focus of analysis is on the structure of the interaction in these sessions (i.e., a leader-initiated topic for discussion, a student reply, and leader evaluation of this response). Short excerpts of data are used to support and illustrate the claims that are made in regard to the nature of the interaction that is observed in these settings.

The Leader's Role in Conducting Verbal Facilitation Sessions

In much adventure education literature (Brackenreg, Luckner, & Pinch, 1994; Gass, 1990; Knapp, 1990; Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Priest & Gass, 1997; Quinsland & Van Ginkel, 1984) the leader is positioned in a manner that portrays her/him as a guide who assists the program

participants in discovering their own meaning of an experience by providing an appropriate framework for discussions. Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, and Gass (2000) consider that the role of the leader is to "set up an environment where learning through reflection can take place and all participants are able to understand the meaning of the experience for them" (p. 9). Others (Chapman, 1995; Joplin, 1995) maintain that the role for the leader is to help students make connections between an activity and other life situations so that experiences can be given meaning and be integrated into students' lives. In many of these accounts, the role of the leader is idealized, and s/he is seen as a neutral or background figure to the "real" action, which is the student reflecting on, and speaking of, his/her experiences. Chapman maintains that the leader's role is to give just enough assistance for students to be successful, but no more. He argues that if the approach is truly student-centered, students may not be aware the leader had a role at all. He suggests that leaders in adventure education are like coaches who "are largely removed from their roles as interpreters of reality, purveyors of truth, mediators between students and the world" (Chapman, p. 239). Spegel (1996) claims that the elicitation of student-generated responses, coupled with appropriate processing of the activity, allows adventure educators to move "beyond teacher-student rhetoric to enhance deep learning within students" (p. 30). The leader is frequently portrayed as a benevolent guide who is not actively, or at least overtly, involved in directing and orchestrating the student reflection and learning process. Students are apparently free to draw valid and meaningful conclusions from their own experiences.

While numerous commentators have remarked on the role of verbal processing and the leader's role in guiding student "self-discovery," several writers (Bell, 1993; Boud, 1997; Bowles, 1996; Brown, 2002a; Estes & Tomb, 1995) have questioned how verbal facilitation is enacted and how it positions the participants in these sessions. Boud claims that present conceptualizations of facilitation and the role of the facilitator are often based in notions of group relations training and are not sufficiently critically aware of the need to acknowledge diversity in the promotion of learning from experience. They are, he fears, too rooted in the "older humanistic notion of facilitation, or worse, direct instruction" (Boud, p. 1). Both Bell and Bowles express concerns regarding the position adopted in some texts that imply that participants are not "fit to give justice to their own potential" (Bowles, p. 11) and therefore they need prompting by the leader to achieve certain outcomes. Estes and Tomb state that the increasing emphasis on leader-directed processing in adventure education may be devaluing both the learning experience and the promotion of self-reliance among participants. They suggest that over-processing can be problematic as it is the leader rather than the student who decides what was learned and its relative value. They do not doubt the importance of facilitating an experience in order to assist the transfer of learning, but they question how this should occur. Similarly, Proudman (1995) suggests that the leader may take too active a role in achieving particular outcomes:

How interested is the teacher in guaranteeing a certain student outcome? Too often, teachers allow their unconscious conditioning to interfere with opportunities for student self-discovery. (p. 243)

Brown (2002a) argues that the physical structuring of sitting in a circle, and the pre-allocation of student turns at speaking, creates a formal turn-taking system where there are limited options for students to make contributions that fall outside of the topic determined by the leader. In a more recent paper, Brown, (2003) argues that the use of leader paraphrases or summaries of student responses acts as a means to allow the leader to "fix" what the student really meant. In paraphrasing the student's response the leader has a powerful mechanism to articulate a preferred version of events.

What is apparent from a brief review of the literature is the fact that the leader/facilitator has an important role in the facilitation of students' reflection and articulation of their experiences. Irrespective of whether the leader's role is placed in the foreground or cast in the shadows, with little reference to his/her involvement in this student-centered approach to learning, it is only through a detailed study of actual interaction that we can better understand the potential consequences of our individual and collective actions as leaders.

Methodological Approach

Ethnomethodological studies focus on the common-sense and routine knowledge(s) used by participants as they interact in social activities. In examining how people use language in the ongoing process of social interaction, ethnomethodology focuses on understanding the actions that result from talk (Baker, 1997). By examining the common-sense and routine knowledge(s) employed by the participants in these sessions, attention is drawn to how the leader both enables and constrains students to speak about their experiences. Heap (1990) maintains that the importance of ethnomethodological studies is that they can inform us about the structures of phenomena and the consequences of those structures for realizing the leader's ends and objectives. The knowledge that is derived from such studies can therefore make a difference as to how practice is organized, on both a personal and collective level (Heap, 1990). The discussion generated may inform educators regarding the decision to continue or modify current facilitation practices. A detailed analysis of interaction reveals whether it is the student's unmodified contribution, or the leader's version of what is "really" meant, which is admitted as contextually appropriate knowledge. For a detailed explanation of ethnomethodology the reader may wish to consult the following texts: Baker, 1997; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Maynard and Clayman, 1991.

The data presented for analysis are drawn from transcripts of facilitation sessions that were recorded as part of a larger research project (Brown, 2002b). The students were year-nine boys

(14 years of age) from an Australian independent (private) school. Each group consisted of approximately 15 students and two leaders. The students were participating in a four-day program as part of the school's standard curriculum. The program consisted of a two-day river journey in canoes, and two days of activities at the school's residential camp. Activities in close proximity to the camp included rock climbing, participation on ropes course elements, and a day walk. Most, if not all, of these students had previously participated in the school's sequential outdoor education program. The leaders were specialist outdoor education teachers employed by the school. Both leaders were males. All participants agreed to participate in the study and were aware that the discussions were being recorded. The specific focus of the program was to encourage teamwork by providing activities that required co-operation and communication. Apart from the researcher's presence, no modifications to a "normal" program were enacted. The researcher acted as a participant observer but did not contribute to the discussions.

Analysis

Space constraints do not permit inclusion of the "excerpts" used in the analysis. However, for specific examples of the extracts used in this study, please refer to Table A1 in the Appendix. The transcripts are transcribed according to the notations developed by Jefferson (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). (See Table A2 in the Appendix for notations used in this study.)

Establishment of Topic: Initiation Phase

At the commencement of each facilitation session, the leaders and students assembled and sat in a circle formation. Following any preliminary comments the leader would introduce the topic for discussion and call upon the students to respond. (See Appendix Table A1, *Extracts 1-4*, for examples of leader introductions to these discussions.)

In each of these openings to a discussion, the leader clearly articulated the basis on which the students were to respond. The "rightness" or issue of "best practice" in determining the topic for discussion is obviously open to debate. The important point is *how* these sessions were introduced and framed. The leader's initiation of a particular topic constrains the range of replies that the students may reasonably make. In carefully stipulating boundaries of the topic for discussion in these settings the leader is employing a strategy used by teachers in classrooms that functions to address two central issues in instructional interaction: (a) the leader's concern in getting the right answer from the student, and (b) the student's concern in getting the answer right (French & MacLure, 1979). Our attention will now turn to how the leader responds to student replies.

Leader Evaluations of the Student Replies

The leader responds to the student's reply to the topic for the discussion in a number of clearly identifiable ways. The leader accepts the student's contribution by issuing a

straightforward evaluation such as "okay" (see Table A1, *Extract 5*, turns 91 & 93, in the Appendix). In some replies the leader is a little more tentative (i.e., "okay; that's pretty appropriate"). (See *Extract 6*, Table A1 in the Appendix.)

The leader also responds to the student's contribution by paraphrasing or formulating what the student has said (for a detailed discussion of the use of paraphrases, see Brown, 2003). The use of paraphrases or formulations as a means to fix meaning is well established in studies of conversational interaction (Heritage & Watson, 1979, 1980). In formulating the "real" meaning of the students' replies the leader is able to confirm what is relevant for the students in this setting. The student reply provides a resource, particulars of which the leader can either choose to ignore or extend, and treat as newsworthy. Young (1984) argues that in instructional settings, "the formulating practices involved seem aimed less at making the pupil's meanings clearer than at shaping them to conform to the teacher's view" (p. 236). Through the act of formulating the student reply, the leader is in a position to announce what all the students will be held accountable to now know (Baker, 1991a; Heyman, 1986). Formulations also function as a useful mechanism to avoid having to issue a negative evaluation of the student reply. By modifying the student's reply into a more appropriate response in his formulation, the leader is able to correct the student's position without overtly disagreeing with him. In this way, facilitation appears to be a positive experience for both parties. However, as Young (1984) so aptly states:

> We have a practice which, while forming as much a part of the teacher's contribution to
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> the dialogue as teacher monologue, passes itself off as a version of the pupil's contribu-
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> tion. As such it appears to play a central role in managing the active participation of
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> pupils in the verbal appropriation by them of the teacher's "knowledge" in a natural and
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> orderly but essentially hidden manner. (p. 235)

What is clear is that the use of a formulation provides the formulator, in this case the leader, with a powerful means to shape the direction of the talk and maintain control over the sense of what is meant (Heritage & Watson, 1979).

The Use of the Initiation-Reply-Evaluation Sequence (I-R-E)

Studies of classrooms, and other sites where instruction occurs, have identified the pervasive use of the *initiation-reply-evaluation* (I-R-E) sequence of interaction between the teacher and students (Baker, 1991b; Heap, 1985; MacBeth, 2000; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979, 1985; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Baker and Freebody (1989) have argued that the I-R-E sequence is the defining form of teacher-student talk. The use of the three-part interactional I-R-E sequence —leader question →student reply →leader evaluation—is the basis for leader-student dialogue in these facilitation sessions. The initiation component need not be explicitly stated at the beginning of each new student turn as it is contained in the leader's opening address at the

beginning of the session. Regardless of whether or not the evaluation phase takes the form of a "simple acceptance" ("okay; great") or an extended sequence involving the use of a formulation, the three-part sequence underpins the interaction and is central to understanding how social order is constructed in these settings.

The role of the I-R-E format in educational settings has been extensively discussed in studies of instructional interaction (Baker, 1991b; Heap, 1985; MacBeth, 2000; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979, 1985; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). MacBeth (2000) describes this three-part sequence as the "workhorse of direct instruction" (p. 37), while Heap (1983) argues that this three-part sequence is associated with a discourse format that has the task specific use and the pedagogic aim of instruction.

The pervasiveness of the I-R-E sequence can be understood in relation to its role as a device to control student participation and to regulate the construction of knowledge based on the leader's interpretation of contextually appropriate replies (Baker, 1991a). Central to this sequence is the leader's ability to set the topic or pose the question in the introduction. Of particular importance for facilitators of group discussions is an understanding of the role that establishing a question, as a basis for discussion, plays in eliciting particular replies. The request for students to reply to a question is, as Baker and Freebody (1993) state, a "powerful device for directing talk, perhaps even more powerful than a lecture, since students are asked to participate in and legitimate their positioning through questions" (p. 283).

While it is the leader who produces the topic for discussion and certifies the adequacy of the student reply, the students must provide a response in the I-R-E format (Heap, 1985). In providing responses to a topic set by the leader, the students are participating in the accomplishment of a social order (Baker, 1991a). While this is a collaborative production, it does not mitigate the asymmetrical relations that exist in reference to the distribution of knowledge, or more particularly the leader's "knowledge" of the appropriate knowledge that can be produced. By evaluating the student's reply the leader is demonstrating his claim to knowing the "right" answer (Pomerantz, 1984). The leader's ability to evaluate student replies is premised on asking the types of questions to which s/he can reasonably be expected to know the answers; a phenomena which Mehan (1985) describes as the "ubiquity of known-information questions in educational discourse" (p. 127). Stubbs (1983) argues that questioners may ask questions that appear to be asking a student for her/his personal view, when the questioner really has a particular answer in mind. The asking of questions to which the questioner already knows the answer are described as "test" (Baker, 1991b) or "pseudo questions" (Stubbs, 1983) and are distinguished from "real" questions where the questioner is genuinely in search of an answer to a question to which he does not know the answer. In these sessions, the leader asks a series of pseudo-questions on which s/he apparently considers her/himself knowledgeable and therefore is in a position to evaluate the appropriateness of the student reply.

> Teachers' questions are essentially tests of pupils' ability and willingness to move towards the "official" frame of reference, and what pupils say "has meaning" in the context of some body of school knowledge which excludes or transforms what is "irrelevant." (Edwards, 1980 p. 248)

The leader's evaluations of students' replies repeatedly reaffirms her/his claim to superior knowledge which, in turn, forms the basis of the knowledge that is produced and admitted as appropriate in the ensuing discussion. As in other institutions (courts, medical consultations) the talk in these facilitation sessions is organized to produce a single outcome where the leader's expert knowledge or claim to prior knowledge warrants closing the talk when that outcome has been achieved (Edwards, 1980).

The manner in which facilitation is conducted in these settings is similar in form to the *recursive chain* of three-part sequences that Drew and Heritage (1992) identified in classroom instruction. The use of this recursive chain permits the leader and students to collaboratively build a list of items/values/knowledge(s) that are valued in this setting. In her/his setting of the topic, the leader establishes the *grid of specifications* for student contributions that functions as a "wish list" for student replies. Through the ongoing talk the students add items/values/ knowledge(s) that meet the leader's criteria of appropriateness. Through the use of this format the participants are constructing a list of sought-after items, or more particularly, a series of lists of valued knowledge(s).

While the author has argued that the use of the I-R-E sequence in facilitation serves an instructional purpose, it also performs a role in the acculturation of students (Baker, 1991a). Hammersley (1977) makes a similar point when he states that in instructional settings the students, or at least most of them, have learned a form of interaction in which authority and knowledge are bound together. The students "are being socialized into a world in which knowledge is something known by those 'in authority'" (Hammersley, 1977 p. 83). Young (1984) takes a stronger position arguing that this three-part format has a "number of features which appear more consistent with indoctrination than education" (p. 223).

In using the I-R-E format, the leader is able to evaluate the adequacy of a student's reply and, if necessary, work with the student to produce a modified version of the initial response that fulfills the criteria for adequacy. This instructional format allows the leader to diagnose the student's (in)competencies as a learner, and if necessary, to instruct her/him through the introduction of more contextually appropriate resources that assist her/him in providing an acceptable reply. This conceptualization of student-leader interaction is based on an understanding of the student as being incompetent and not yet able to understand the "real meaning" therefore requiring the input from the leader to achieve competence (French & MacLure, 1979). The paradox of *competent leader–not yet competent student* interaction is realized in the conflict between

the leader's need to treat the student as sufficiently competent to interpret the requirements of the topic but also as incompetent in regard to her/his ability to provide a contextually appropriate response (MacKay, 1974). In the use of formulations, the leader can be seen to be correcting or modifying the student response so that the student is led to the "right" answer. The paradox of the *competent-incompetent* learner in the adventure education context is alluded to by Bowles (1996). He argues that the form of adventure facilitation advocated in many texts implies that participants in programs are "not fit to give justice to their potential; they must be helped, prompted by 'heteronomous' agents and stimuli, forced if necessary" (p. 11). Hovelynck (1999) has also expressed the concern that facilitators may take too active a role in passing on their own meaning that is to be attached to an activity.

Conclusion

A close reading of interaction from facilitation sessions reveals the mechanisms by which the leader can control these discussions. The analysis challenges practitioners and theorists alike to move beyond current practices and develop new ways in which to allow students to articulate their learning. If, as the author contends, verbal facilitation sessions permit the leader to accept, reject, or modify student contributions, it is pertinent to ask—how is student experience positioned in an approach to facilitation that is structured around the three-part I-R-E sequence? The analysis indicates that by using this form of verbal facilitation the apparent uniqueness of the student's experience turns out to be a managed social accomplishment (Perakyla & Silverman, 1991). As in the more formal classroom setting, facilitators run the risk of not exploring student experience in favor of shaping the student's reply into "the right answer" rather than exploring the student's thinking (Hammersley, 1977). As in studies of classroom interaction, the apparently student-centered talk in facilitation sessions does not mean that the student's knowledge is necessarily valued (Baker & Freebody, 1989). The practice of employing students' knowledge and feelings about various topics/events appears to personalize learning, and renders instruction more student-centered. It has been suggested that the use of such techniques, in what is essentially a leader directed discussion, may only serve to expand the legislative boundaries of instruction into personal and social areas of the student's life (Baker & Freebody, 1989). Thus, the apparent primacy of the learner's experience and the role of the leader advocated in much adventure education literature may not accurately reflect practice, or at least practice when verbal facilitation is conducted where the leader is in a position to set the topic for discussion and evaluate student replies.

How facilitation sessions are structured is a key issue for adventure educators. If instruction is the aim of a particular session (e.g., how to fit a harness), then there is nothing essentially wrong with using the I-R-E format. If, however, adventure educators wish to provide

opportunities for students to express and articulate learning that reflects their lived experience, they may wish to explore other ways to facilitate this learning. Perhaps it is time for a more critical consideration of some of the assumptions that underpin current practice. The author has presented a case that suggests that in verbal facilitation sessions there is the opportunity for the establishment of knowledge and power relationships that are in opposition to the claimed aims of experiential educators. It is not suggested that the consequences of these actions are intended by practitioners. However, adventure educators face the danger by not critically examining their practice, of perpetuating a social order in which one member can determine the meaning of experiences for others. What this article *does* reinforce is that adventure education theorists cannot accept conceptions of the leader that idealize him/her as being a neutral, or background figure, who is of little or no consequence to student's self-discovery through experience. It is also argued that students are not necessarily free to draw valid and meaningful conclusions from their own experiences.

Why is it that, as leaders, we consider it necessary to *re-voice* what a student has already said, other than to fix or change the meaning in some way? Why do we feel the need to call on students to answer a question of our choosing and then evaluate the appropriateness of their reply? Whose learning is favored in these sessions and, more importantly, what is being learned? Are we engaging in word games in facilitation sessions or the enculturation of students into our world view? Boud (1997) succinctly summarizes many of these concerns in his call for consideration of the broader context in which facilitation upon an activity takes place:

> "Who establishes the activity for whom?" is often the most fundamental question to be considered. If it is initiated by members of dominant social groups for those that are not members of dominant groups there is inevitably the risk that reflection will merely add to oppressive activities which exist and not expose or confront them. The most likely outcome will be compliance, in which participants go through the motions of reflection without revealing (sometimes even to themselves) what are the real learning issues. (p. 6)

This paper has "problematized" and raised questions in regards to currently observed facilitation practices. The hope is that this article will encourage practitioners and theorists to examine the basis of their actions, actions that if left unquestioned may have unintended consequences for our students. Having highlighted the potential for verbal facilitation to act as a vehicle for direct instruction, one challenge is to move beyond leader-directed approaches, and find new ways in which students can "remain the 'agents' of their experience and their learning" (Hovelynck, 1999 p. 22). The other challenge is to continually critique and reflect on facilitation as it is enacted to ensure that the theory and practice of facilitation continually inform each other in meaningful ways.

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Appendix

Table A1.
Sample Extracts of Leader Introductions to Discussion

Extract 1

| 1 | L | ... we want <u>each</u> person (0.3) to say (0.8) one (0.7) short (0.7) <u>clear</u> (0.7) statement ... I want it to be something that's going to be <u>essential</u> (0.8) for (0.4) this group for us (0.8) to have a successful day today (1.5) what do we need ... each person needs to say (0.9) something different (1.7) a'right (0.6) and it has to be something to do with our group (0.2) ... you need to say why that's important for the group (1.5).... |

Extract 2

| 274 | L | I just want to ah (.) go round the circle one more time (2.0) an' ah I know this is taking a little while but (.) I'm (0.8) quite impressed with (.) the ah discussion that we've had (1.8) I want you to (3.8) <u>tell me</u> (.) what benefit the <u>school</u> is going to get from you having been here for the two days that you've been here so far (1.0) ...(0.8) <u>how</u> does the school benefit so this really probably why the school (1.0) why you think the school is running the program now ... |

Extract 3

| 1 | L | um (0.7) what I would like you to do is to (1.4) have a good think about today (3.2) and I want you to (1.0) think of <u>one</u> thing (0.8) that people <u>did</u> today or that they did well today (0.8) that would help make the rest of this week (0.8) or for that matter next week (0.5) when you're not canoeing and rock climbing or next term or next year (1.2) or next month at home or (0.8) just something that would make things go better for you (1.3) so things that you saw <u>people</u> (0.8) not just one person doing (1.0) things that you saw people doing that would <u>help</u> things go better (2.0)... |

Table A1. (continued)

Extract 4

104 L ... guys those are (0.5) all fantastic (0.5) bits of feedback for you guys (0.8) um (.) that you've said about yourselves and that's really good (0.8) what I want you to do now (1.2) is ah (.) ha have a really good think (0.8) and think of (.) something that's like one of those things (.) that you could do next week (1.2) to make next week a bit better (1.4)...

Extract 5

90 S1 um (0.5) like people sharing food and stuff (1.2) like (0.4) making dinner a whole lot easier (2.0) so everyone could enjoy a good dinner (1.0)

91 L okay (2.4)

92 S2 um um (1.4) just the (0.5) ah everyone (1.3) um doing the work without being (0.8) told (1.7) like (0.8) a couple of times (3.2)

93 L okay (3.1)

Extract 6

16 S1 I'm Len um (1.5) so (.5) teach us about the bush and have fun stuff

17 L okay so teach ya how to have fun

    S1 Yeah

18

19 L okay (1.5) that that's pretty appropriate (2.0)

Table A2.
Examples of Transcript Notations

(0.6)	Number in brackets indicates a pause in tenths of a second.
(.)	A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a pause in talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
=	The equals sign indicates "latching" between utterances.
[ ]	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent talk indicate the onset and end of overlapping talk.
(unclear)	Words within brackets indicate difficulty in accurate transcription. This is the transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance.
Under	Underlined words indicate speaker emphasis.

Note. Based on notations developed by Jefferson (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).