IMPACTS OF A ROPES COURSE EXPERIENCE ON A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Hunter Merritt
B.A., Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia, 1998

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A Thesis

by

Hunter Merritt

Approved by:

__________________________, Committee Chair
Katherine Pinch, Ph.D.

__________________________, Second Reader
David Rolloff, Ph.D.

__________________________
Date
Student: **Hunter Merritt**

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

_________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Greg B. C. Shaw, Ph.D.  

Date

Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration
Abstract of IMPACTS OF A ROPEs COURSE EXPERIENCE ON A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

by Hunter Merritt

Leadership development programs, and the curricula written for these programs, are worthy of scrutiny. Recent research on leadership theory (Avolio, Walumba, & Weber, 2009; Kelliher, Harrington, & Galavan, 2010; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) suggests that leadership is a complex subject. It is further argued (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001) that experience is a preferred method for teaching complex subjects. This research supports incorporation of cooperative training methods that integrate learners’ experiences with the complex skills being taught.

These leadership development and training programs include in their curricula many educational techniques, including simulations, case studies, experiential learning and outdoor adventure (Kelliher et al., 2010). Adventure education literature suggests that leadership is a meta-skill (Priest & Gass, 2005), which is an aptitude for soft skills, hard skills, and an understanding of the relationship between the two sets of skills. This literature maintains that experience is the best method for teaching meta-skills.

The purpose of this study was to examine impacts of a ropes course experience as perceived by participants of a corporate leadership development program. Interpretive
research of qualitative data from a small group interview summarizes participants’ various perspectives on their ropes course experiences.

This research determined that the sample of participants felt that the ropes course experience did have an impact to their program. Specifically, ropes course programming appeared to serve individuals in various ways: to build confidence in participants, which is expressed as a transferrable leadership skill; to provide participants a break from the typical work environment, which allows individuals a potentially safe environment for experimentation and positive failure; and to illustrate the differences in leadership style and behavior of fellow program participants, which leads to greater empathy and a heightened level of self awareness. Suggestions for improvement of the ropes course experience in serving this population are offered by the interviewees. It is concluded from these suggestions that the value of a ropes course is enhanced significantly by the active and engaged presence of a facilitator to help bring out leadership lessons, and to encourage reflection and introspection.

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Katherine Pinch, Ph.D.

____________________________
Date
DEDICATION

This work is humbly dedicated to my loving wife Lori, and to my beautiful and brilliant children, Eben and Sunny.
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I am deeply indebted to Associated Students Incorporated, Peak Adventures, and the Challenge Center for my growth as a leader, a facilitator, and a person. Lastly, I must acknowledge the Association for Experiential Education, which has provided invaluable research for this work, as well as a vibrant and passionate community of scholars, practitioners, and educators beside whom I am proud to serve and lead.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a complex subject. Definitions of leadership are dynamic and fluctuating. In a recent study of alumni from the leadership development program of the Center for Creative Leadership, more than 84% agreed that the definition of effective leadership has changed in the last five years (Martin, 2007). Training for leadership development must be flexible and dynamic in order to maintain relevance to the subject and its current or future definitions. With the amount of money spent on training and development each year, the curricula of programs are worthy of scrutiny. According to a recent report by the American Society for Training and Development, U.S. organizations spent more than $134 billion on employee learning and development in 2008. More than $45 billion of this spending went to external services such as workshops, vendors and external events (American Society for Training and Development, 2009).

Research over the past half century (Avolio, Walumba, & Weber, 2009; Bass, 1997; Burns, 1978; Stogdill, 1974) concludes that leadership is an attainable skill. Responding to the increasing demand for capable leaders, training and development programs have been designed which claim to develop leaders across several fields and contexts (Huey & Sookdeo, 1994). These leadership development and training programs include in their curricula many educational techniques, including simulations, case studies, experiential learning and outdoor adventure (Kelliher, Harrington, & Galavan, 2010). Assessment of tactics for teaching leadership and investigation into what program
participants claim to have received are beneficial and valuable in determining future progress in leadership development curricula.

The impact of one popular form of experiential education, defined broadly as “ropes courses,” is examined in this paper, from the perspectives of adult participants who experienced a one day ropes course program as a component of a leadership development program.

Need for the Study

Mitchell and Poutiatine (2001) argue that the complex subject matter and soft skill sets taught in leadership development curricula are best suited for interactive learning experiences. While traditional teacher-centered instructional methods prove effective in basic straightforward skill building, they seem insufficient for subject areas that are poorly defined (Human, 2006).

Experiential education, in contrast to its traditional counterpart, is associated with a more learner-centered method of education, and it has gained popularity and credibility worldwide as a tactic for leadership development (Gookin, 2006). One form of experiential and adventure education, ropes courses, is widely accepted and incorporated as a piece of leadership development curricula. Evidence measuring the value of ropes courses is compelling. However, such evidence is often anchored in pedagogy, which may limit the potential of ropes courses as an agent in developing opportunities for examination of complex systems and social situations that are among the driving forces in adult, or andragogical (Knowles, 1980) settings.
The history of leadership theory as a subject of study is relatively short. The history of leadership development is even shorter. Leadership theory is organic in nature, changing in perspective faster now than ever before with the growth of digital technological media and the introduction of new cultural outlooks (Shah, 2006). As corporations and agencies strive to meet the pressing need to develop leaders within fields of expertise, navigating the muddy waters of emerging leadership theories, leadership development programs should be closely and constantly examined for relevance, effectiveness, and impact. The correlation between leadership and learning is strong (Brown & Posner, 2001), and the science behind measurement of leadership capacities is sound (Avolio et al., 2009), but the efforts at measuring leadership and the effectiveness of interventions solely by quantitative means paints only a partial picture of the impact of leadership development. Furthermore, as subjective as experience can be, it is valuable to hear and interpret the reflections of participants who may have had very different reactions to the same activity.

As educators, trainers, researchers, and students of leadership are seeking correlation between ropes course activities and leadership development, qualitative research based on participant perspectives can bolster an intuitive claim that worthwhile curricular components such as ropes courses can enhance the value of leadership development programs. Such qualitative research must be sound in order that the claims of results may be accepted in a culture that relies largely on quantitative measurement. Examples of qualitative research on experiential education and leadership development
are few, an exception being a dissertation by Black (1993) regarding the study of management teams in what he calls Outdoor Experiential Training (OET). This study utilized naturalistic inquiry to develop a data-based, substantive grounded theory about one OET program. This study closely follows the Black method, although it is limited as a descriptive work and offers no grounded theory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore, from the perspectives of participants, the potential impacts of a facilitated ropes course experience on a corporate level leadership development program. The study is led by two research questions: 1) What role do ropes courses and experiential education play in leadership development curricula; and 2) What, if any, impact do such activities on a ropes course have on participants in a leadership development program?

Definition of Key Terms

*Adventure Education* involves experiential learning in an expeditionary setting, often with specific educational goals in mind, to include competency in soft skills such as group behavior as well as hard skills such as backpacking or mountaineering. It is important to define adventure education for the purpose of this paper, as the transference of learning is pertinent to leadership development in contexts other than outdoor leadership. Components of outdoor leadership are defined by the National Outdoor Leadership School (Gookin, 2006), which states that learning objectives for students include communication skills, leadership skills, small group behavior, judgment in the
outdoors, outdoor skills, and environmental awareness. The ability to perform at a level beyond understanding soft skills or hard skills but also comprehend the relationship between the two concepts, demonstrates a competency called meta-skills (Priest & Gass, 2005). It can be argued that adults are better prepared to understand the complex concepts of leadership if meta-skills are developed.

Andragogy refers to the concept of adult learning. Literally, the root of the term comes from two Greek words, andro-, meaning “man, not child” and agogus meaning “leader of,” Malcolm Knowles used this term coined initially by Edward Lindeman to distinguish adult learning theory from pedagogy, literally defined as child-centred learning. Andragogy makes assumptions about the design of adult education that emphasize the value of an adult student having past experiences from which to draw and a sense of ownership over learning. Experiential education is a potentially powerful andragogical methodology within the curricula of leadership development programs.

Experiential Education is most simply described as learning by doing. The term is often used in regard to both theory and practice; in the latter case referring to learner-centred activity, teambuilding and personal growth through activity and reflection. John Dewey, known as the founder of functional psychology, is also credited as the father of experiential education theory (Miettinen, 2000). Experiential education practitioners commonly cite David Kolb’s (1984) four-stage cycle of concrete experience, observation and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing
implications in new situations. This model has been an accepted foundation for experiential learning as well as a routine source for leadership development curricula.

*Leadership* is dynamic, subjective, and difficult to define. A history of leadership theory over the past century and an introduction to contemporary theories are included in this paper. The emerging body of knowledge throughout the course of the past century that collectively defines leadership today leads to a common belief that leadership is a function of process and relationships, rather than a fixed set of skills belonging to an individual. Leadership theories have progressed with this belief, and contemporary theories are integrative and interdependent.

*Ropes courses* refer to a form of adventure education using experiential education methods which are conducted in a more controlled environment. Ropes courses are often associated with military obstacle courses, and activities on a ropes course often borrow many of the same techniques (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). In this paper, the specific ropes course to which participants refer is an outdoor course on the campus of California State University Sacramento. References to ropes courses and ropes course programs in this paper include both the physical facility and the activities associated with this form of adventure education, as well as the facilitation of discussion that takes place throughout a ropes course program.

*Teambuilding* includes cooperative activity-based experiences that require group cohesiveness, communication and trust. Generally these experiences are challenging,
have some degree of perceived risk and are followed by an intense reflection or “de-
brief” session.

Delimitations

The study subjects were either current participants or recent graduates from the leadership development programs offered by the Sacramento Municipal Utilities District (SMUD), a Sacramento public utilities company. Only participants of the programs, and the trainers from SMUD who organized the programs, were interviewed. Participants volunteered to be a part of the study. Participants came from one of three different ropes course experiences, all of which were developed and led by the same facilitator, at the same location. As a result, some participants were still active in the six-month leadership development program; others had completed the program, within the year that the interview occurred. One of the participants was a SMUD training and development coordinator.

Limitations

The notions of subjectivity and the influence of researcher bias are of great importance in qualitative research. It is important to acknowledge a potential limitation: that the author of this study also served as the facilitator of the ropes course programs on which participants reflected in the interview.

Although qualitative research accepts conclusions based on the interpretation of data from a smaller sample than in quantitative work, it is acknowledged here that the sample of participants, all willing volunteers in this study, may not accurately represent
perspectives of the leadership development program participants who chose not to participate in the study, but also have opinions of the ropes course experience.

It is further acknowledged that experiences of the participants interviewed are individual, unique, and subjective. For instance, an emotionally or physically challenging situation to one person may not have existed for another person in the same group. Comments taken in context are to be associated with only the person speaking, not that of the whole group.

The participants who volunteered for this study reflected on their experiences from one of three different ropes course programs. Environmental and social factors, therefore, must be considered with regards to the answers provided. The ropes course team leader (also the researcher) visited the organization before each program to explain the general guidelines and administer waiver forms. An itinerary (see Appendix A) was written based on the feedback from the interview. This itinerary serves as a guide for delivering the ropes course experience; the ropes course leader ideally follows the itinerary as closely as possible, but adjustments are made as necessary in the interest of time, immediacy of the content, emotional or physical safety of the participants. A recording of this interview would contribute data to a robust ethnographic study.

Leadership, as it is studied and defined here, is limited to a largely western European paradigm. Other parts of the world measure leadership and its qualities differently. Investigating the diversity of ethnic perspectives on ropes courses within leadership development curricula would make an interesting future study.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter five topics are addressed: (1) a review of both classical and contemporary leadership theories; (2) a brief examination into leadership development; (3) a review of experiential education as a theory and a method; (4) an explanation of andragogy or adult learning; and (5) an explanation of adventure education as a form of experiential education, to include the use of ropes courses as a method and teambuilding tool for adult education.

Leadership

Leadership is as old as civilized society. Study of leadership is newer by comparison. References to the characteristics of people with great power over others are found in literature as early as the ancient Islamic biblical texts of the Quran (Shah, 2006). However, the etymology of the English term “leader” dates back only to the fifteenth century. Contemporary leadership studies cite older classical texts such as Machiavelli’s The Prince (Gilbert, 1941, 1964) to provide historical perspectives on leadership, which maintain applicability and validity to current and future leaders.

Thomas Carlyle’s On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, written in 1841, is considered the first academic reference to leadership in western literature (Kaplan, 1983). Carlyle's work focused on the capabilities of an individual to influence others, and it put forth the argument that individuals are born with certain leadership traits. This proposal led to the first known theory on leadership, the Great Man or Trait
Theory (Stogdill, 1974), as exemplified by Max Weber’s (1905) charismatic leader (as cited in Stogdill, 1974). The question of heritability is still debated today (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

A challenge to the trait theory emerged from experiments performed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology by Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippett and Ralph White (1939) in the 1930s; this theory became known as the Behavior Theory of leadership. Research by Lewin and others established that a group of followers reacts differently to leaders exhibiting one of three distinct behavioral styles of leadership: autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire. It was also determined that individual leaders are capable of shifting between these different types of leadership behavior. The results of this research further indicated that followers would be more likely to react aggressively or apathetically to the autocratic style of leadership, and that the aggression was less likely to be directed at the autocrat than at other members of the group (Lewin et al., 1939).

The value of Lewin’s contributions to adult learning, experiential education, organizational development, and leadership theory are immense. It is particularly noteworthy that Lewin's initial T-group studies ("T" = training) were later adapted into a template for the experiential education model that is often attributed to Kolb (Miettinen, 2000). These studies influenced a whole new concept in research as well; Lewin pursued, until his untimely death in 1947, the concept of interdependent variables in research, leading to the currently accepted practice of action-research (Lewin & Lippitt, 1947),
which accepts the integration of researchers’ perspectives and influences with that of the subjects of study.

As the leadership theory pendulum swung away from the initial belief in leadership as an individual trait, theories on leadership as a behavioral attribute or quality were further expanded to include Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946); Functional Theory (McGrath, 1962); and Situational Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Hersey, 1985). These theories rested in the paradigm of leader-follower transactions, a paradigm, which was then challenged by a values-based approach, such as Robert Greenleaf’s concept of the servant leader (Bole, 1994), which addressed the role of the leader in facilitating team members. Transactional-Transformational Leadership theory, first coined by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1985), describes the paradigmatic difference between leadership viewed as a matter of contingent reinforcement versus leadership viewed as a motivating of followers beyond self-interest.

Transformational leadership may be the most cited theory in leadership development curricula. It has proven to be a popular framework for many current leadership development programs, and this theory integrates the previous leadership theories to the degree that it is currently accepted worldwide by organizations as a common theoretical framework in multiple contexts, organizations and nations (Bass, 1997). Hayashi (2005) remarks, for example, on the conceptual and theoretical relationship between transformational leadership and emotional intelligence, defined here
as a capacity for social behavior. As a form of pedagogy, transformational learning is also cited (Brown & Posner, 2001) as a mirror to transformational leadership.

The recent emergence of new leadership theories is moving further away from the capacity of individuals or the relationships between leaders and environment, to an even more enigmatic position incorporating a perspective of systems theory. These new leadership theories include an expansion on transformational leadership known as authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2006), and a conceptual framework known as complexity leadership theory, which relies on an integrative view of three additional leadership theories: adaptive, convergent, and generative (Hazy, 2006). Substantive research in the area of complexity is currently being developed; further achievements in research will certainly place complexity leadership theory at the forefront of future curricula on leadership, hopefully drawing from the wellspring of concepts by Dewey, Lewin, Kolb, and other researchers and practitioners who support experiential aspects of learning.

All theories of leadership, from traditional to contemporary, are being employed in educational discourse as well as leadership training and development curricula, with philosophical discussions on the most contemporary leadership theories (Goldstein, Hazy, Lichtenstein, & Rykert, 2008) bringing the pendulum swinging back toward the issues of individual heroism, heritability and even fear of the persecution of an individual leader.
Leadership Development

There is little doubt today that leadership is a teachable and learnable skill. If we move forward on the belief that leadership can be taught and learned, the following questions must be asked: what aspects of leadership can be taught; who is best prepared to teach leadership; how will it be taught; where is the best place or situation for learning; and finally when and for whom is leadership development appropriate? The complex subject of leadership and the long-term development of leaders are what drive the academic curricular initiatives, while the practical and immediate need for leaders drives the actions of corporate, non-profit, and governmental trainers to create their own programs (Kaagan, 1999).

Leadership development has its deepest roots in the military sphere, as practical leadership training for command positions was the earliest form of training for soldiers and officers (Army, 1999). Although there are currently classes and even whole degrees in leadership studies (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001), the current means of training and development for leaders often must accommodate the schedules of full-time employees, taking the form of a six month to one year developmental program that meets monthly in the evening or on a weekend. Often, the students are adults with a wealth of personal and professional experience themselves. Leadership development programs are utilizing a wide array of methods to teach this complex subject, as evidenced most recently in a review of programs by Kelliher et al. (2010):
The past decade has seen a move towards more participatory modes of knowledge dissemination both within and outside of the classroom (Ayman et al., 2003; O'Connell et al., 2004) where efforts have been made to promote learners who are active and are stimulated to handle confusion and complexity (Atwater et al., 2008; Mello, 2003; Hess, 2007). In consequence, a variety of different teaching methodologies are now being used in management education and leadership skill development (Burgoyne et al., 2004: 50), including simulations, case studies, experiential learning and outdoor adventure. (pp. 115-116)

Universal aspects of leadership development do exist that share commonalities across contexts and transcend barriers (Bass, 1997). This may lead to a point of view that any training in leadership can be beneficial, regardless of the specific context in which leadership is being taught. However, organizations may struggle with the applicability of cross-contextual models on their internal leadership development programs, as evidenced in the challenge of applying organizational development and management approaches to a military environment (Paparone, 2001) or the applicability of corporate models in training of medical professionals (Xirasagar, Samuels, & Stoskopf, 2005).

Whether a leadership development program is designed to develop leaders only within its own context or as a general course in understanding leadership, every leadership development program should aim at unlocking the individual’s ability to achieve a balanced understanding of contextual hard skills, relational soft skills, and the holistic understanding of a relationship between these two distinct sets of skills, a
phenomenon described by Priest and Gass (2005) as meta-skills. Meta-skills can be gained through hands-on, contextual learning that is relevant to the student, with structured discussion or debriefing to cement understanding.

What has changed most recently in this postmodern worldview is that leadership is not viewed as a set of traits belonging to an individual but rather an enigma of group interaction (Bass, 1997). If an individual possesses – or can learn – leadership abilities that transcend all of the various leadership theories, it rests in that leader’s ability to adjust to the dynamic relationships between people and situations, to recognize and value this dynamic as ultimately meaningful to success, and to understand leadership as a process of influence (Priest & Gass, 2005). Brown and Posner (2001) argue that experience is one of the most powerful of the teaching tools to enhance one’s understanding of leadership, that leadership and learning are inextricably entwined, and that “creating conditions that foster transformational learning are essential in the design and delivery of leadership development efforts” (p. 279).

The National Outdoor Leadership School, or NOLS, provides a programmatic example of contextual leadership development that claims to have cross-contextual impacts. Serving a dual role as a training curriculum for outdoor professionals and as a valuable resource for those just seeking leadership experience (astronauts from NASA, for example), NOLS states that learning objectives for their outdoor leadership students include communication skills, leadership skills, small group behavior, judgment in the outdoors, outdoor skills, and environmental awareness (Gookin, 2006). Leadership
curriculum at NOLS may include theoretical and historical foundations of leadership theory, hands-on activities and seminars, and experience leading small groups of peers, all of which contribute to the development of a participant beyond the contextual skill of outdoor leadership (Sibthorp, Paisley, & Gookin, 2008). If outdoor leaders are learning a meta-skill, it is best categorized as the capability of emotional intelligence (Hayashi, 2005), which naturally falls in line with current theories of leadership as a relational skill.

Experiential Education

Experiential education is simply the act of learning by doing. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) defines this as “a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (AEE, 2010, ¶ 1). There are many various forms of experiential education being practiced today, in and out of the classroom, for youth and adults alike, to include: active learning, problem-based or inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, service-learning, and place-based learning (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

Educative experiences may occur to learners without the aid of facilitators or educators, through self-directed learner actions. Experiential education is also presented in the form of deliberately contrived scenarios, defined by Alvarez and Welsh (1990) as “a structured sequence of cooperative group activities whose goal is to improve members’ interpersonal skills, capacity to trust, and self-esteem” (p. 49).
John Dewey, the founder of functional psychology, is also credited as the father of experiential education, stemming from his contributions to the progressive education movement of the early 20th century (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999). Experiential education programmers and practitioners will also refer to the experiential learning cycle credited to David Kolb (1984), whose popular model involves the recurring four-stage cycle of (1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and (4) testing implications in new situations. This model has been a foundation for experiential learning and a routine source for attempts at adult education theory. It was originally named by Kolb himself as the “Lewinian Experiential Learning Model” and the “Lewinian model of Action Research and Laboratory Training” (Kolb, 1984, p. 21) and is attributed to the source of studies performed by Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippett and Ralph White at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Miettinen, 2000). It is intriguing to note that from this work by Lewin emerged the behavioral theory of leadership, with the delineation of three leadership styles – autocratic, democratic, and lassiez faire – which is still taught as a theory and maintains a prominent space in current leadership development programs. Lewin’s research suggests a close association with the sociological study of individuals in group settings, experiential education, and the aspects of leadership across several contexts.

Contextual experiences benefit the student, as “traditional formal education with minimal work practice may not be able to prepare students with realistic conceptions of the nature of their future work and the skills needed in it” (Murtonen, Olkinuora, Tynjala
& Lehtinen, 2008, p. 206). It is recommended (Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass, 2000) that an experiential educator include opportunities for participant interaction that promote individual and shared reflections on past experiences, and to develop concrete “field experiences” on which the group can reflect throughout the leadership development program. Creating concrete experiences is a key component of experiential education programming, in order to achieve a “reflective opportunity for the student and the instructor to articulate what needs to be done” (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001, p. 180).

Training, education, and development for adults addressing a complex concept such as leadership should be designed in a holistic (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001), collaborative, co-creative spirit. The pedagogical environment using didactic methods of traditional teacher-centered instruction are insufficient for subject areas that are not well-defined (Human, 2006). Strict adherence to the teacher-centered model in the adult environment may even produce a negative effect on training and development of adults for complex concepts such as leadership, for “an education system that favors individual cognitive prowess over teamwork…contributes to a general apathy and skepticism toward leadership” (Gardner as found in Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001, p. 181).

Adult Learning

Most adult learning theories came from the discipline of social psychology. Malcolm Knowles furthered the earlier work of Eduard Lindeman (Ozuah, 2005), who recognized that pedagogy derived from the Greek piad meaning “child” and agogus meaning “leader of,” was the only model of assumptions and learning characteristics then
available on which educators could base their curricula and teaching practices. Knowles popularized the term *andragogy*, taking the prefix from the Greek word for “man.”

Six assumptions emerged from Knowles’ concepts regarding adult education: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something; (2) adults need ownership and responsibility for their own thinking and learning; (3) adults have experience and prefer to learn experientially; (4) adults need learning to be timely and relevant; (5) adult learning is life-centred and so they approach learning as contextual and involving concrete problem-solving; and finally (6) adults learn best when they are intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1980).

An important distinction between andragogy and pedagogy is the voluntary participation of adult students to be in a place of learning. It is important to determine the motivation of adult learners in a leadership development program, as they are often participating for both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Relevance, motivation and satisfaction are considered key factors in the adult learning process. According to Zemke and Zemke (1984), adults who are motivated to seek out a learning experience do so primarily because they have a use for the knowledge, subject, or skill being sought.

**Adventure Education and Ropes Courses**

Adventure education involves experiential learning in an expeditionary setting, often with specific educational goals in mind, to include competency in soft skills such as group behavior as well as hard skills such as backpacking or mountaineering. It is through the adventure education method that outdoor leadership is often learned. This
method claims to provide individuals, regardless of the purpose of learning, an opportunity for physical, emotional, and cognitive challenge (Goldenberg, 2001).

Because the lessons from hardship are abundant in adventure settings, examples from outdoor leadership are often used in developing metaphors of general leadership principles, such as Ernest Shackleton’s ill-fated voyage across the South Pole as interpreted by Dennis Perkins in Leading at the Edge (2000) or Jim Whittaker’s climbing of Everest in Kouzes and Posner’s The Leadership Challenge (2002, p. 387).

This concept of learning through challenge or adversity necessitates a brief description of Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), referring to the state of mind of a person when engaged in activity that matches ability with challenge. Application of this theory in corporate leadership is illustrated by Kouzes and Posner (2002) who claim that the most common words to describe the best leadership experiences are challenging, rewarding and exciting. These authors refer to Flow theory in explaining the need to develop and promote “psychological hardiness” (p. 207) in leaders. Dealing with the challenges that a leader faces is a form of resilience, and development of this resilience is important in any leadership program. This psychological hardiness can be developed through experiential learning opportunities that are authentically challenging, whether simulated or real. As Huber (2003) suggests, the experiential mode of learning has a valuable place in leadership curricula as a tool for teaching tolerance for ambiguity, which appears to be a key component of successful leadership.
Although adventure education in outdoor settings can have a powerful and sensational impact for individuals and both inter- and intra-personal relationships that result from them (Miles & Priest, 1990), educators also find value in adventure education experiences that are more controlled, such as a ropes course experience, to augment the professional development and training of students. For example, psychology students who participated in a ropes course reported (Human, 2006) an understanding of trust, group dynamics, and empathy. These qualities are part of the teambuilding goals of many leadership development programs.

Ropes Courses

The term ropes course, as it is used here, refers both to the facility where activities occur and to the activities associated with experiential education theory, to include ice-breakers, games, teambuilding initiative problems, and high ropes elements (Goldenberg, Klenosky, O'Leary, & Templin, 2000). Not all ropes courses are located outdoors, nor do all experiential education activities necessarily take place on a ropes course. Ropes course program activities often contain a component of guided or facilitated reflection, called debriefing, which generally takes the form of discussion before, during, or after ropes course activities.

Although the ropes course history stems from a military obstacle course model (Army, 1999), a philosophy of choice is inherent in the programming of many ropes course experiences, unlike their military obstacle course counterparts (Miles & Priest, 1990).
The outcome of any ropes course experience is admittedly subjective, personal, vague and difficult to measure. In his examination of the adventure process, Sibthorp (2003) concludes that antecedent variables cloud the matter of quantitative measurement and variable isolation, such that “it is possible that each program is too distinctive in nature to offer useful generalizations” (pp. 81-82). Nonetheless, ropes courses have been used as an augmentation of various curricula in many environments, with a positive correlation to achievement of learning goals (Goldenberg et al., 2000). Much of the work in ropes course programming emphasizes team or group cohesion, cooperation, and shared success. Earlier work on social interdependence by Morton Deutsch (1949) concluded that groups have greater success when the individuals in the group perceive that others in the group can also reach their goals. Deutsch’s findings appear to wrap back to Kurt Lewin’s (1948) concept of group dynamics and teamwork, suggesting that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Teamwork is a word often expressed as the goal of leadership development programs, as well as the stated goal of ropes course programming consumers.

Adult Learning in Adventure Education and Ropes Courses

Some research has been conducted regarding the value of outdoor and experiential education to adult development, such as Gass’ (1993) determination of the value of this methodology in developing self-knowledge, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Subsequent research has aimed to measure the value of ropes course and other adventure education programming interventions based on the impact to individuals, often measuring
qualitative data using quantitative methods (Owen, 1990). In a meta-analysis of ropes courses by Gillis and Speelman (2008) it was determined that some of the highest effect sizes were recorded from research focused on therapeutic outcomes, versus developmental outcomes. The researchers postulated that participants in a therapeutic setting may be more receptive to this form of intervention. However, it is more noteworthy that the researchers found frustration in the way that measurement tools were varied, making assessment of quantitative measurement difficult. In Gillis’ own words, “a valuable experience measured qualitatively may produce ineffective quantitative results due to poor selection of data collection” (p. 130). Determining the effectiveness of measurement tools or models for other teambuilding interventions has been questioned (Rushmer, 1997) as well. Although there are definite examples of research pointing toward the effectiveness of ropes courses (Goldenberg et al., 2000; Human, 2006), this research does not specifically address adult learning, nor does it conclude that leadership development outcomes are met through this form of programming.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the research methods for this study, a basic explanation of the ropes course program used and a description of the events upon which participants are reflecting in the small group interview. The chapter concludes with an overview of the methods of data analysis.

Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a one-day ropes course experience on a leadership development program, as perceived by adult participants in a six-month leadership development program designed by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District. The research questions that this study aims to answer are: what role might ropes courses play in leadership development curricula; and what, if any, impact do activities on a ropes course have on leadership development? The study is exploratory and descriptive (Babbie, 1986), and results are not generalized to a greater population, but a hypothesis is established that experiential methods have a value and impact on leadership development curricula.

Studies on the effectiveness of interventions in leadership development exist, as do studies on the efficacy of ropes courses as a tool for learning. The data gathered on each of these topics range from qualitative (Brown & Posner, 2001) to quantitative (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). Avolio et al. (2009), for example, used meta-analysis to investigate the relationship between leadership development interventions and enhanced leadership-
related outcomes. A positive correlation was determined between training interventions, some of which may be categorized as experiential, and a noteworthy effect on work outcomes. None of the 30 meta-analyses prior to this study had focused on leadership interventions and more than one model of leadership. The case for a one-day intervention is made in this research, concluding that there is value to this intervention:

Reichard & Avolio (2005) reported that regardless of the theory being investigated, results showed that leadership interventions had a positive impact on work outcomes (e.g., ratings of leader performance), even when the duration of those interventions was less than one day. In terms of utility, participants in the broadly defined leadership treatment condition had on average a 66% chance of positive outcomes versus only a 34% chance of success for the comparison group. (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 425)

From a qualitative perspective, the efficacy of ropes course or other experiential education interventions in leadership development is supported (Goldenberg et al., 2000). This research supports the claim that a single ropes course day may have some significant degree of impact on the overall outcome of a larger leadership development program.

Ropes Course Overview

The ropes course on the campus of California State University Sacramento, named the Challenge Center, was used as the site for all programs to which this research refers. The Challenge Center has been in operation since 1991. It is managed by the campus outdoor program, ASI Peak Adventures, whose mission is to enrich the learning
experience through adventure education and leadership development (Associated Students, 2010). The programs run by the Challenge Center vary widely from adjudicated youth to college undergraduates to corporate clients. More than 8,000 participants experience some form of ropes course experience annually.

Both students and non-students are employed by ASI Peak Adventures to facilitate ropes course and adventure education programs. Training for ropes course facilitators in group management and activity leadership, promotion of physical and emotional safety, belay and high-angle rescue techniques, and facilitation techniques are held on a regular basis. Peak Adventures operates on an apprenticeship model, which provides adequate field experience to give facilitators a level of comfort working with groups.

A team leader is scheduled to work on every program. This person is responsible for contacting the client, capturing information on the goals and expectations for a program, writing an itinerary and briefing staff members on the details and scheduled activities for the program, and closing the program day with a staff de-brief and summary for record-keeping and shared experiential learning.

The client information sheet indicates goals and expectations a group may have regarding the program. This document serves to inform the team lead prior to the initial interview between him/her and the client, which takes place approximately one month prior to the scheduled ropes course event.
On the program day, the first action at the Challenge Center is an orientation to the facility, including identification of the location of the water fountain and bathrooms and a warm welcome from the lead facilitator and staff. As the program begins, explicit attention is paid to establishing an emotionally comfortable environment for taking risks, learning and experimenting.

Depending on time constraints, the familiarity of the participants to one another, and the stated goals of the group, the program then progresses on toward icebreakers, name games, and simple task-oriented activities. If a group is larger than a dozen participants, more than one facilitator is engaged and the group is split into smaller groups (7-12 participants). After each activity, a time for reflection is made available, and this debrief may be driven by the facilitator or by any member of the group. At the discretion of the facilitator, and with the concurrence of the group, activities are introduced that present increasingly difficult challenges to the group.

After this period of “low ropes” activities the program may progress further to include any number of “high ropes” activities, which are defined as having a need for traditional climbing equipment and a belayer, which is originally a nautical term for securing a rope, and is accepted in mountaineering culture as a person who secures a climber using a rope. Specific detailed description of the differences between low and high ropes is explained by Goldenberg (2001). Participants are instructed and observed as they put on climbing harnesses, and instructions are given to participants on ropes course climbing techniques. It is at this time that the issue of emotional safety is again explicitly
mentioned, often using the model of comfort zones. The zone of emotional comfort is an individual, subjective phenomenon. Participants are explicitly encouraged to choose their own level of participation, and they are asked not to push other participants beyond their personal levels of comfort.

If it is appropriate and meets the goals of the client (as was the case in this leadership development program), a system known as “team belay” is introduced, wherein participants serve as the belayers, under the guidance and supervision of the ropes course staff. Several emotional factors come into play when the power of a team belay is enacted, most importantly the trust of fellow group members.

At the end of every ropes course program an opportunity for reflection and discussion of the events is made available to the participants, and a celebration of achievement is encouraged by the ropes course staff. The length and depth of this reflection can be as short as a few moments or as long as an hour, depending on the goals and expectations of the group.

Methods of the Study

This qualitative study followed a naturalistic inquiry method in order to develop sufficient data from the responses of a single group of participants. Thirty employees from a company were initially approached for this study, all of whom had experienced at least one of the leadership development programs through the same company.

This group was delimited by: participation or completion of the leadership development program offered at their place of work; interest and willingness to
participate in this study; and recollection of the ropes course portion of the program. Participants in the study had experienced one of three different leadership development programs, and consequently had different ropes course experiences. The three ropes course programs were held in the same place, using the same itinerary (see Appendix A), and led by the same facilitator.

The invitation to participate in the sample group was sent by email from the organization's training and development office along with a copy of the interview questions and a form for consent and participation in the research (see Appendix B). A choice of two, one-hour group discussions were offered. A single session was sufficient to affect a purposive sample.

The research data consisted of responses gathered from participants in a one-hour focus group interview. The interview was conducted using a guiding question sheet. The focus of the research was on participants’ reactions to the ropes course portion of their leadership development program. The data was recorded using a digital recorder, transcribed by a third party, and returned to the researcher to examine for accuracy.

A small group interview was preferred as a method partly due to time constraints, but also because it provided an opportunity for a willing sample of respondents to discuss their feelings about the experience and to play off of one another’s reflections. The researcher then subtly observed and gathered additional information such as non-verbal responses. Where participant observation requires the researcher to study participants in real-life situations (Berger, 2000), and in-depth interviews require a substantial time
commitment, the group interview typically takes less time to administer, can be done once, and take less of the respondents’ time overall. A group interview can, according to Szwarc (2005) “allow the participants, through the course of a “guided” discussion, to interact with each other in such a way that a range of insights on the topic of conversation will be uncovered” (p. 42).

While the interview guide was used to direct conversation, the researcher used additional probing questions that allowed the participants to elaborate on information and details for their discussion. The interview guide was provided ahead of time to participants, along with the invitation and consent form.

Disclosure and Consent

Research participants were invited to participate by the company’s training and development coordinator. Research participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures for data collection, and possible benefits of the study, prior to an interview. The consent form included a statement describing the procedures used to maintain confidentiality of the records and data pertaining to the participant, and how the research participant’s privacy will be protected.

All personal information collected about the research participants during the course of the project was kept strictly confidential. Information that could be used to identify an individual research participant was not released. Names of research participants are not included in this paper.
Data Analysis

Analysis of interview results followed an intuitive process of “winnowing” of interview responses, a process recommended and explained by Seidman (1998, pp. 102, 107-109). Sections of text were identified by the researcher as having some value to the paper, and then this data was divided into categories for thematic connections. Separation of text along these categories allowed the data to produce emerging themes.

Profiles of individual participants were not used (Seidman, 1998, pp. 100, 101), as it was preferred in this case to identify themes rather than assigning personal reactions to individual people. Names were omitted from the research entirely. Paragraphs were divided and rearranged according to the themes, not necessarily in chronological order.

Although several authors (Cho & Trent, 2006; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) have claimed that ongoing interpretation or member checking is inherent in a quality interview, follow-up interviews were not conducted in this study. The interpretation of research was made more robust through the submittal of the data to two doctoral-level researchers in the field of leadership. The raters were given the data (the same quotes as are provided in this paper) and asked to code the data in one of three categories: place, process, or people. This submittal process aimed to achieve a credible level of interrater reliability.

The process used in analyzing the qualitative data from this study follows Glaser’s (1992) methods of constant comparison, but the study goes no further than the level of exploratory research. No grounded theory is developed from this study nor
extracted from the results found. The value of interpretive research lies in the ability of the researcher to revise and amend direction of subsequent research steps. Such amendments were made here, as the development of understanding increased through the process of data analysis.
Participants made comments related to leadership development, voiced opinions and impressions of the ropes course experience, and expressed feelings regarding the leadership program. Interpretation of the interview results yielded several key points on participants’ perceived impacts of a ropes course experience, as well as participants’ suggestions for improvements to the administration of the ropes course program.

All of the respondents felt that the ropes course experience had an impact and found that the experience had value, but individual reactions were varied. Some participants, for example, found that the experience was valuable as a means of learning about other members of the program. Other participants focused on individual mental and emotional reactions to challenges. Some participants expressed feelings of anxiety regarding the proposition of high ropes activities, while others expressed feelings of boredom or disappointment that the program did not include more high ropes challenges. It is for this reason that the categories were not delineated by positive or negative reaction to the ropes course, but instead divided among areas of focus as categorized by place, process, or people. Leadership development outcomes were expressed throughout the data. This was not designated as a specific or separate category.

Category and Theme Selection

From the winnowed interview data three categories emerged which conveyed distinct aspects of a ropes course program: place, process, and person. The categories
were further sub-divided into themes (see Table 1). A 90% interrater reliability between two additional researchers supported this categorization.

Table 1

*Theme Subdivision*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme #1: Place</th>
<th>Theme #2: Process</th>
<th>Theme #3: People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• outdoor setting</td>
<td>• scheduling or placement within larger program</td>
<td>• leadership styles of fellow participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• away from office</td>
<td>• facilitator involvement in group processing</td>
<td>• awareness of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• recreational aspect</td>
<td>• participant expectations or anticipation of program</td>
<td>• building rapport and trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• novelty</td>
<td></td>
<td>• feeling of belonging or team cohesion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The category of “place” summarized comments related to physical facility or environment; the category of “process” summarized the administration of the ropes course event, including the behavior or influence of ropes course facilitators; the category of “people” summarized the comments related to learning about self-awareness, awareness of others, or awareness of the group. These categories were kept intact for subjective cross-examination by two additional researchers, maintaining the rigor of this interpretive research method.

Comments were made relating to the value of being out of doors, the value of being out of the office, the recreational value or the experience, and the novelty aspect of the experience. These comments were categorized as having some relation to place.
Comments were made relating to the timing of the ropes course within the larger schedule of the leadership development program, as well as individual expectations of what a ropes course event is or should be (including some reactions to disappointment over unfulfilled expectations). These were categorized as being related to process. Comments on the different leadership styles of fellow participants, acknowledgement and awareness of oneself, and increased rapport with fellow co-workers were categorized as revelations related to people.

Interview Answers

A list of questions was explicitly understood by participants only as a “guide” to the process. The decision was made by the researcher to move through these questions rather quickly, allowing each interviewee to address questions or topics of interest or importance.

After a round of introductions that included each participant’s name, how long he/she had been in the organization, and in which of the leadership development programs he/she was enrolled. One of the members of the group was from the training and development staff, and her experience on the ropes course came from a trial of the ropes course vendor, not as a part of a leadership development program. Her comments were welcomed and encouraged by everyone in the group, and they are of equal value in this paper.

A conversation emerged from the group discussion, near the end of the interview, which led the researcher to introduce two new questions:
1) do we need a ropes course, or can this be done elsewhere?

2) is a facilitator needed to aid the process, or could this be done without a facilitator?

The conversation that emerged from the above questions was a productive part of the interview and of this study. Discussion and responses to these questions led to participants’ feedback regarding the power of personal comfort zones, as well as the role of the facilitator in-group management. Facilitators were said to help participants with regards to introspection, personal reflection and transference of learning.

Place

Regarding the physical facility, the first theme to emerge was the value of a ropes course facility as a novel, engaging, and challenging setting for an experience. It was also commented that the facility provided an out of doors experience, a fun experience, and an opportunity to get out of the office. One participant compared it to a vacation, and also made mention of the neutral environment for learning:

Having it offsite is kind of akin to going on vacation. You go on vacation, you don’t think about any of this. You don’t even care about any of this. “I’m missing a meeting. I’ve got this and this and this.” You don’t care. It’s outside. It’s fun. It’s a new environment. It’s a neutral environment. It’s not my building or your building or that kind of thing. So, I think it’s critical to have it offsite. Super enjoyable to have it outside.

Or, as another participant stated:
it was a lot of fun and different. You know, it was something different from what we were used to, which was just being in a classroom environment, throwing around ideas.

Participants agreed that the facility had value as a novel venue, and that having the program at the specific facility impacted people personally and memorably.

You could probably do [the activities] at a park or anywhere like that but I think it was really nice at the end to be able to -- for hours you’re sitting there looking at that stuff and so at the end, to be able to have the opportunity to go up there was really kind of a reward.

In terms of the Ropes course, and I was just thinking as you were saying that because you take these activities and let’s say it’s a warm summer day and we go down to [a] park and we’re down near the river and we’re doing these same things. No, it’s not going to be the same experience. There’s something, as you pointed out, that there’s just something awesome about the physical artifact of looking up there.

One participant described the emotional process of overcoming personal anxiety. This person explained that the mere presence of high ropes elements had a profound effect on his/her experience. The emotional fear of having to participate in specific activities on the high ropes course (even when the emphasis was made to establish an
atmosphere of choice and comfort) altered how this person mentally engaged in the low ropes and teambuilding activities:

Being underneath that, being there and looking it and then those times when you just kind of looking around and think -- there is an impact there and that, the physical artifact of those courses, of those activities, I mean you are envisioning in those moments when you’re not engaged with something else. You’re envisioning yourself within that space. So, you can’t do the same thing not at that place. You can do the same exercises but the surroundings will have a tremendous impact on what’s gained from that or what’s not gained from that. And you know if we would have gone, “We’re going out to the Ropes course, we’re going to do these things but you won’t be able to climb,” it’s like, “Okay. Well, I know that going in.” But still looking at that and looking at those things, that’s making an impact there and it’s kind of filtering or making you think differently about what’s going on within the exercises.

These comments suggest that some power may exist within the environment of a ropes course itself.

Process

The reaction to the process aspect of the ropes course was varied, and a few participants admitted that they would not categorize the experience as having been a ropes course per se, but rather a form of teambuilding, “I think that I would probably describe it more as a really good teambuilding and a really good awareness program.” At
least one participant expressed disappointment, based on a pre-conceived notion of what a ropes course program would entail. This notion was based on a daughter’s soccer team experience the previous year at the same ropes course. Specifically, this person was expecting more high ropes and physical challenges, and so expressed some unfulfilled expectations:

It wasn’t a Ropes course and that was a disappointment out of the gate for me. It was a teambuilding activity half-day that happened to be at a place where there was a Ropes course that a couple out of 30 people participated on. So, I mean, and that was an expectation thing. Maybe I wasn’t paying attention when they were describing it. I’m not sure. This is an opportunity for me to work just outside my range of comfort. So, not having the opportunity to really try the course, that was a disappointment. I felt it was not what I expected going in.

Another participant stated,

I wouldn’t call it a Ropes course because really it wasn’t an opportunity for everybody to test individual on the Ropes course. It was, what, three or four of eighteen or nineteen actually did anything with ropes. And so, I felt a little bit disappointed. It was kind of like “this is what it is, no, it’s not.”

Comments regarding the value of the ropes course in providing opportunity for introspection and personal reflection:

That’s the interesting concept of leadership and through these Ropes courses exercises and other exercises that we did, you hear the term leadership team and
everybody’s struggling so what do you get if you get through and become the leader? … there was that introspection part. There was, “When do I hold back and when do I push forward,” because those are the lessons that really get you in position where you become a part of a team that leads rather than an individual who just imposes one’s vision and goes like that. So, I think it’s a wonderful part of the whole <sic> experience.

I think on the introspection, I think if you had something else…you put the questions, you put certain questions on paper or puzzles or whatever…I don’t think there would be nearly as much as when you’re actually there in the moment, watching everyone try these different things because then you’re really thinking outside of the box and you’re really like, “Oh, I have a great idea. Do I say it now or do I wait until later?” And you wouldn’t get that off of just a piece of paper, doing a basic game or something.

I think with the introspection piece… at least for me, and I know for <participant> and perhaps the others, we’re already going to put that in there…but for those who would not naturally go to there, the facilitated assistance to get to that side and to look within on what just happened.
Not being the non-introspective person, there’s another side that I wouldn’t look at…so, how could a facilitator take me from where I am to get what the person’s perspective is? And I think so that’s a pretty tall order for a facilitator but I think it’s a great opportunity to move people across the whole gambit of how one single experience can be experienced in so many different ways across this continuum depending on what you bring to it, what you are in it and where you come out of it.

Participants answered positively that a facilitator or staff member was needed for effectiveness of the ropes course experience. While some responses addressed the need of the facilitator as a safety measure and as a manager of the activities, one participant expressed a feeling that the presence of a facilitator maintained a level of buy-in within the group:

I would say definitely having a facilitator for each exercise to explain and then do the debrief. I think that’s mandatory. I think if you gave somebody a sheet and you sat them down in a room like this and said, “Okay. Now, learn this exercise,” I think it’s going to be all about like, “Hey, I’ve got to check my email.” So you wouldn’t get any of that. Introspective is, I think it’s more dependent on where the person is. If they’re there and open and in a place in their world where they’re ready to learn, then they do it. If they’re there and they think, “Okay, I just need to move the apple from here to there,” then that’s all they’ll get. So, I think it’s really dependent on that person and where they are in their life.
One participant suggested more depth in the facilitation of debrief and discussion:

What I noticed was there was a short debrief after each activity, “What did you think?” But it didn’t really dig into the introspection part of it. You know, “Did you think about how you were listening and how you were speaking?” So, I had it in my notes, one of the questions, “What would you suggest?” and I would suggest more of a debrief to say this is what you should be thinking about and what you should get out of the course.

Another participant suggested that frontloading or “pre-briefing” an activity for particular outcomes or lessons would be of value:

…as far as the introspection of what happened, I think that in that specific instance there should be some sort of -- a little more -- and maybe even some precursor to that saying, “We’re kind of looking for this,” without giving it away obviously and then at the end debrief that.

These suggestions indicate that there is a significant value in the presence of a facilitator; furthermore that the engagement of a facilitator in the explicit process of transferrable learning outcomes contributes to the impact and lasting value of a ropes course experience.

People

Most of the participants agreed that the level of comfort was increased by the mention of comfort zones during the program day. This language was reinforced and used regularly during the programs. It seems from the transcribed data here that the
concept and the language of comfort zones was embraced, as many participants used the same language in the interview, to describe their personal perspectives and reactions to the ropes course:

…getting outside of your comfort zone, that’s one thing I think the Ropes course I think did for me anyway and I think a lot of people that go through it is you do get put into an area that you’re out of your comfort zone, not only within a team as a leader but physically. So, it kind of puts you in two spots at once and the program as a whole definitely got me out of my comfort zone and that’s kind of part of what you want to do as a leader is see how you’re going to perform outside of that comfort zone.

I’d have to say…when we went into this program we had some expectations or so that we talked about earlier and the program, I believe, both the Ropes course in and of itself did meet those expectations but I think it also exceeded it in that it gave me a new perspective as to coming outside of my comfort zone and finding new ways to be a leader.

Other respondents expressed the feeling of comfort, but in different language:

I have to just say too that when I got there initially and was looking at everything, I thought, “Oh, they’re not going to make me do this. There’s no way I’m going to.” And then by the end of everything, at the very end when you said, “Would you want to try something?” I was like, “Okay, now I want to,” whereas when I
got there I’m kind of terrified of heights so I was like, “No way.” But your whole attitude changes throughout the program, which is really neat.

And then it was kind of -- I think it almost gears you up, like that whole day you’re like, “I’m going to do it” or “I don’t know if I can but I’d like to try,” and I think that’s kind of important too because you’re in an environment where it’s safe to learn and it’s safe to be yourself because you’re not at work anymore and you’re in your tennis shoes and maybe people don’t ever see you in tennis shoes and that kind of thing.

Another participant felt as though the value of choosing one’s own level of adventure was an impactful experience:

So I think it creates a better opportunity for you to climb a tree, to cross the rope, to encourage your friend when they do it, to go, “Oh my god, I could never do that, but I’m going to take pictures and that’s awesome. And I can’t believe you did that.” So, I think Ropes course, having at the Ropes course was part of what made it so great.

It was interesting to note that the level of challenge was more appropriate for some than for others, and that not all participants were disappointed by the level of physical challenge or dearth of high ropes activities:

I agree with that too, that it wasn’t as Ropes as I thought. But when I finally did do my one thing, that pushed myself out of the box, I’m like, “Okay, that was
enough.” So, if we had four hours or six hours of like pushing myself out of the box, I would not have survived.

Some constructive criticism was offered that the ropes course was scheduled in the middle of the leadership development program, versus the beginning. Relationship building at an early stage was a missed opportunity, as expressed by one participant:

my first thought was we had it too late, that we really didn’t have it soon enough because we had pretty much gone through most of the, “let’s pick our project piece” and my first thought was it was a fun teambuilding thing…you get to know some of the folks and…there’s that trust deal about handling ropes and there’s little friendly competition…some of the value was lost by waiting too long to have it…

Another participant commented similarly:

It should be as early as possible …the earlier the better because I think what it really did, for me there was -- I remember when we all stood around in this circle and you were supposed to reveal something…it was interesting to kind of see what this person is, more than just, “Oh, yeah, I know she works in accounting and I know she’s on my team and she does this for my team. Oh, now I know she sails.” It brings kind of more that personal touch to it so I really liked that part of it.

By contrast, one participant expressed the value of having experienced the ropes course in the middle of the program, after some training in leadership had occurred, and
after some relationships had already been established in the group. This situation provided greater insight into other participants’ leadership styles in action:

We were at an advantage where we did know the people that like to speak up first so go ahead and let them speak and if doesn’t make sense what they’re doing then, as a leader, step in and say, “Well, let’s try it this way,” and we had enough training to know how to speak to that situation rather than just step on their toes. So, yeah, listening is something that I took out of not only the Ropes course but the programming overall.

Regarding observations of self, others, and group interactions, experiences seemed to be that the participants were enlightened to leadership styles of other students/participants, especially in novel and challenging situations:

What I took away from the day was seeing a lot of individual contributors, even though they were team exercises. They were difficult team exercises. Stuff we weren’t used to, physical and climbing. And although there was a lot of ropes, there wasn’t a whole lot of rope activity but there was a lot of teambuilding activities and just seeing the individuals contribute, or at least try. There might have been some physical limitations but they were contributing through ideas to at least help the team be successful for the different exercises.

One participant expressed enjoyment at the cognitive interaction and competition between groups:
I think that the structure, the way it broke it into two. I think that was interesting and you’re kind of like looking and seeing what another group is doing. You know, so it’s like you’re wishing you were in this group or that group or wherever. But everything that came out of it was very valuable.

One participant was impressed by how quickly teamwork emerged through the process, given this participant’s short term of employment:

I had just come into the group and so I had literally worked with my team for like four days so it was really a good experience for me…being brand new, I learned so much about them in those few hours and I really, at the end of the day I really felt like, “Wow, this is great.” I feel so much better about who they are and who I am and how we can work together than never having had that experience. So, I can really see how a group of strangers coming in and doing this Ropes course could really bring you together and make you just feel like a part of the team whereas it could take months to get to that feeling without it.

An enlightening observation was offered, that participation in the leadership development program may itself alter the dynamic between participants:

I thought it was difficult to call it leadership training when everybody there wants to be the leader because then everybody there is trying to be the leader, whether they’re, “I’m going to go first,” or “I’m going to answer that question,” or “I’m going to solve this puzzle better than you.” So, it gets a little bit competitive I think so it’s hard to really -- you know, if you just took a group of people, like
maybe the ten people you work with, and you went to this, then you would see, “There’s a couple of people who are sort of natural leaders and there’s a couple people who are great support,” and it would sort of filter out a little bit better. Whereas, when you have 20 people who all want the same thing or perceive themselves as being looked at as needing to be a leader, “So, I better show it. I better step it up,” then it becomes kind of difficult to differentiate that.

Another participant added similar comments regarding the leadership focus of individuals:

…you’ve got a group of people who all want to be leaders, who all want to show leadership and what do you do when everybody there is the one who wants to be the first one to talk? And so I think it really shows you not necessarily self restraint but that there’s value in taking a step back also and letting others have like a chance, “Why do you always have to be the first one to talk,” right? Or just trying to understand that in the real world there’s one CEO of the company, there’s not 150 or 2,000.

One person noted that the group activities provided an opportunity for self-awareness of leadership styles, and that of others:

…it you have all these people, when we separated into the two different groups to do our specific challenge, you were able to see who the out-in-front leaders were, who were the ones that kind of sat back and said, “Okay, I’m going to do my part in leading by helping in the background,” and you got to see all of the different
levels of leadership. I thought, anyway, in my group and it was really kind of interesting in the group that I was in, in that we had to -- we’re walking across planks… we had to balance and everything and so it was different people had different perspectives and it was nice to hear the different perspectives as to how to go about doing all of that and it was -- and then you had people that led by strength, physical strength. So… you could see those leadership abilities coming out in different areas and I agree, I think it would be great to do this on the front end but I think for us in that send it was good to do it a little bit later on because a lot of us had discovered these things about ourselves already and so we knew what our strength was and in what areas so we were -- I think those things came out.

Participants observed their peers’ various leadership styles, and struggled with the situation of shared leadership, which was described as “warriors” in this passage:

I thought the different puzzles or games that we had to solve, either as a team or team against team, whatever, you had either situation where you had all these chiefs and no warriors so you had all warriors, no one that willing to step up as the chief because one is we’re all trying to be polite and give everybody -- and the other thing is like we’re all trying to lead and it was -- to me there was some internal lessons going on. It’s like, “Okay, I can lead by just speaking louder than everybody else,” because very people who can match me for vocal volume. So, if I really to lead and get myself heard, I could try that, which I didn’t. Or I can step
back and just be frustrated and sulk and let everyone do it and just go along with it and so there was some good -- there was some introspection going on there, personally, as I saw how we were all working or not working together and trying to find that way. It’s like, “Okay. How do I contribute here? Do I have anything of value or do I even have a clue about how to go about solving this puzzle we’re faced with?” And if not, I just tell myself, “Just shut up and listen then.” If I do have something to contribute, then how do I try to communicate that? So, that was interesting. I mean, observing those dynamics amongst ourselves and then just my own internal dynamics was something of value that I took from that whole process.

There was a variety of exercises, some familiar and some not so familiar and each…yielded a different kind of leadership through required quality, but there was also that introspection thing where there was some of those things, “Yeah, I’ve done that before. This guy thinks he’s leading. I know that’s not going to work, just keep your mouth shut because he’s going to make sure that happens and it’s going to fail.” And that’s when I can sit back and that’s when I can step up and say, “Well, why don’t we try this instead?” So, there was enough variety and leaders and the needs changed depending on the dynamic of the group of things and what’s being faced.
Communication, and in particular listening, appeared to emerge as a recurring lesson through the ropes course day, for several participants:

What I got the most out of the program was that listening within a group and assessing the situation before you jump in and say something as a leader. It’s really to your benefit rather than just jump in with both feet and go off in the wrong direction.

I think looking at it from a really broad perspective, the lessons learned in particular kind of focused on the Ropes course was that it’s very, very important to have good, clear communication. And not only good, clear communication amongst the people you work with but also from those giving you direction and to be able to have that time to ask questions and really make it clear makes life a lot easier to get whatever task you’re given completed.

One participant explained that the ropes course reinforced the leadership development program’s classroom learning messages:

When the speakers come in our managers that have been coming in and talking to us and giving us their little 15 minutes of leadership wisdom, same kind of thing. Listen, be able to take direction, be able to confidence in yourself and make mistakes and know that that’s okay to make a mistake and if you make a mistake, “I made a mistake,” not “I didn’t do it.” So, when you look at all those big
picture things that they’re trying to teach you. I think it’s just personified in this
day and in these exercises.

A few respondents felt as though there was an application to work, as evidenced
in the comments by one respondent regarding time constraints:

…some of these were timed events so we had that extra pressure which on a mini
scale the projects we have here at the district are a little bit larger and longer
timeframes but you still have that time constraint and pressure that you have work
under.

Another respondent, in contrast, found that the high ropes portion did not apply to his/her
work environment but was instead found value in the experience as a diversion from
work:

…you can’t make direct connection between doing this and your every day job
and work, right, unless -- well, maybe if you’re a lineman or something. I think
there’s value to that because then there’s not that, “This is my job,” kind of thing.
It’s, “Look, I’m just focusing on” -- it gets you away from thinking work and
you’re thinking of playing games with these folks.

One person noticed the value of a shared experience, and warned against the
potential dangers of having learned so much about co-workers:

So, you’ve got this shared experience going forward when you start doing your
"real work" as whatever that happens to be. You have this shared fun day,
challenging day that you can always fall back on and refer whether in
conversation and that, so that can be a good thing. I think if you’re not careful though, there can also be a damaging thing if it’s not directed correctly and you go through some things and people start -- you start pigeonholing people, “Okay, this guys” -- some person comes out and is always over-talking folks for example and trying to push their way and lead in solving a puzzle or a game challenge or whatever. That’s, I can see, a potential downfall.

In sum, the participants found value in spending time with one another, and many came to the realization that learning leadership is not for the designated few, but it is rather a power and responsibility that belongs to everyone. This seems to be a powerful statement of the value of leadership development programs, and of the ropes course component to bring this realization to life:

We go in with these ideas of what a leader is and yet I’m not in a position where I supervise or manage anyone but I see the value in that lateral leadership, being a leader laterally rather than vertically, and I see that. I see the influence that I have on other people, sometimes without realizing it, and that can be a good and a bad thing. And with that comes a lot of responsibility, I think, that we have to take what we’ve learned and what we’ve gained from the program and move forward with that and continue to create a culture of positive thinking.
Chapter 5
DISCUSSION

Participants in this case study agreed that the ropes course experience had an impact, although each person expressed and described a different impact or reaction. While variables may not be isolated in order to effect desired outcomes by every individual in every ropes course experience with absolute consistency, there are reflections in this research that indicate some areas where ropes courses can reliably have an impact. Furthermore, in the case of leadership development, a ropes course may aid people in reaching the goal of relationship building and follow the direction of developing leadership theories, which suggest that social intelligence (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008) is a valued skill for leaders at all levels. Although the winnowing and categorization of themes was performed absent of a prefixed model, in retrospect the data categories and themes – in point of fact, exact words of participants – fall neatly in line with an adventure education processing model introduced by Luckner and Nadler (1997). This model describes the ability of an individual to experience disequilibrium, in a novel setting, being provided a cooperative environment, while being presented with unique problem-solving situations that lead to a sense of accomplishment (p. 258). The processing of the experience and the generalization or transfer of learning are not natural or inherent outcomes of an adventure experience.
Implications for Practice

The ropes course provided an opportunity for team members to learn about one another. As suggested by the review of literature, that enhancement of one’s ability to foster positive relationships and build rapport is a key component of leadership development, the ropes course experience can serve to aid in the understanding of this dynamic ability. Or, as summarized by the comment from one participant:

I think a Ropes course, if it’s done correctly, can be a catalyst to forming a team through shared experience and challenge and overcoming hardships, so to speak. Again, if it’s done correctly (it) be a catalyst toward establishing a sense of trust and comfort with one another.

It is worth noting that this participant considered a ropes course to be “done correctly” which suggests the deliberate intervention of a facilitator. It is the observation and opinion of this researcher, and overwhelmingly supported by the participant responses, that the value of ropes course experiences is increased significantly by the engaged presence of a facilitator. It is important to recognize that engaged presence does not mean a return to didactic methods of teaching, but rather that a facilitator who is present can be the catalyst that brings about the learning that is sought.

Implications for Research

Analysis of qualitative data remains controversial (Patton, 2002), but it is by following a specific and well-documented process that this form of research continues to gain credibility. This researcher agrees with Trochim (2006) that the qualitative form of
research has a special value for investigating complex and sensitive issues such as the topic of leadership.

This exploratory research into one case study does not claim a generalized conclusion that such interventions always have clear impacts. Few of the variables are controllable by design. Or, in the words of Rosemary Rushmer (1997),

On a methodological level, there is no one agreed definition of a team or a team-building intervention, so it may well be the case that we do not compare like with like when we try to construct, as an academic discipline, an integrated body of knowledge. (p. 106)

Nonetheless, future research following the qualitative method used here may become more robust with a longitudinal component, by tracking the lasting effects of such interventions. Although this study did not incorporate or measure individual expectations, input was received and incorporated into the program itinerary (see example in Appendix C). It would make an interesting study to examine the expectations of individual participants and measure a ropes course experience against these expectations.

Interpretation of responses in this study and review of literature on both adult learning and leadership suggests that adult learners value opportunities to experience leadership, perhaps preferring this modality over learning or memorization of tactics or theories. Application of adult learning or andragogical principles and creation of conditions that foster transformational, authentic learning (and leading) experiences are
essential in the design and delivery of leadership development efforts. For the practitioner of ropes course and experiential education methods, it will be important to conduct more in-depth investigations of emerging learning theories and emerging leadership theories in order to bring these two concepts together and improve the curricula of leadership development. As divisions of geography and culture shift, it will be informative to examine various definitions of leadership to determine the best practices for leadership development interventions. Finally, it will be crucial to engage the student or learner of leadership, for this person may be the best trained or experienced leader in the room.
APPENDICES
# APPENDIX A

## Itinerary

### Peak Adventures Challenge Center Program Itinerary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Team Leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, Sept 2, 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Contact</th>
<th>Facilitators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento Municipal Utility District</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Description</th>
<th>Things To Do If Missing Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 “Building Leadership Talents” participants, mostly supervisors</td>
<td>MSC: gems – 3 white gems, ~7 blue gems for each facilitator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Goals &amp; Expectations</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The group has been part of these informational, skill building classes in a 2 year program; this is one of the classes on leadership.</td>
<td>LOW ELEMENTS: Triangle Puzzle, Poly Spots (TIEE), bandedan (Tail Tag), rope (Graduation), Traffic Jam, Keypunch, Maze, Wild Wacky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HIGH ELEMENTS: Giant Ladder 1x1 Team Relay (egg drop)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Member</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Detailed Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:45</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>MGO, bathroom, present puzzle to facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>1 mile, goal setting, what does “building leadership talent” really mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:13</td>
<td>Finger Tag</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:20</td>
<td>Time You Ever</td>
<td>CRC CZS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:50</td>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>One large team, in order to realize unity of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>Leader Eyes / Split</td>
<td>Pairs that recall their greatest fear, or their email address, whichever they prefer. Pick one. Rock Stars and Populations, split into two groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:15</td>
<td>Initiatives</td>
<td>Group 1: Maze, Group 2: Keypunch, Traffic Jam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>Safety Talk / Team Relay Demo / Pick climbers (no more than 5 per)</td>
<td>Technical and Emotional Safety, ABC (Adventure By Choice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:15</td>
<td>Egg Drop Initiative on the Team</td>
<td>Ladder Or Wild Wacky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:50</td>
<td>One on One Closing</td>
<td>Pair up, take a hike...ask each other “What are you going to focus on between now and the next course you attend?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Closing comments</td>
<td>DONE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions and Consent Form
Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a part of SMUD?

2. What were your expectations of the Building Leadership Talent program?

3. Why did you apply to participate?

4. What aspects of the program do you remember best?

5. What were the most challenging aspects of the program?

6. How would you define leadership in the context of your work?

7. Has this definition changed as a result of this program?

8. What influenced this change?

9. The ropes course was one of the experiences in your program – what do you remember from this day?

10. What impact did the ropes course activities you experienced have on the program as a whole?

11. Experiential education is defined succinctly as “learning by doing.” What other experiential learning activities do you remember from the program, if any?

12. Do you feel these experiences affected your understanding of leadership? If so, how?

13. Have you ever participated in leadership development programs outside of this program? If so, please recall the programs in which you have been involved.

14. Are there other factors that you consider may have had an effect on your development as a leader?

15. Are there any other thoughts or comments that you would like to share?
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
You are being asked to participate in research, which will be conducted by Hunter Merritt, Graduate Student, under the supervision of Katherine Pinch in the Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration at California State University, Sacramento.

The purpose of the study is to examine the perspectives of participants in leadership development programs. Specifically, this research aims to understand what aspects of a program curriculum are most effective in developing an understanding of leadership, and to determine the impacts, if any, that ropes course programs have on leadership development curricula. This information is important to further the exploration of experiential education pedagogy, and to better understand the curricula of leadership development programs.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
You will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion about your Sacramento Municipal Utility District “Building Leadership Talent” Program, including events leading up to and applying for the program, your experiences in the program, and your perspectives on the program after completion.

The focus group discussion will last one half hour and will be offered on multiple occasions to ensure flexibility for participants to join a group. Each focus group session will be recorded and later transcribed for evaluation purposes. The results of the session will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

You may also be asked to participate in a one-on-one follow up interview. You may choose not to participate, or choose not to answer or respond to any questions/topics you do not wish to discuss. You may withdraw at any point in the research study.

RISK
This procedure is completely safe and is not associated with any known health or psychological risks. Any discomfort that may occur is anticipated to be no more than what you may experience during your daily life. You may choose to not participate in any questions/topics you do not wish to discuss at any point in the group discussion. The recording will be destroyed as soon as the information has been transcribed. At any time, you can ask any questions you may have about this study, now or later.

BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study; however, this study may be helpful to organizations that provide leadership training or development, and it will benefit the discipline of education in general.

CONFIDENTIALITY
All results obtained in this study will be confidential. Information provided by you will be reported by assigning a pseudonym. All information will be kept confidential and locked in a cabinet in the Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration at California State University, Sacramento.

Records that identify you will be kept private and will be destroyed upon completion of the research project. Any information that leaves the university will have your names and address removed so you cannot be recognized by it. Any reported results from the study will use aggregate data that does not include any identifiers that can be used to specifically identify you.
COMPENSATION
You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

CONTACT INFORMATION
You are encouraged to request additional information, or have questions answered about this study at any time.

The Principal Investigator of this study is Hunter Merritt, Graduate student at California State University, Sacramento; he can be contacted at (916) 873-6253 or via e-mail at hmerritt@saclink.csus.edu; you may also reach Katherine Pinch, faculty advisor, at (916) 278-6752 or via email at pinch@saclink.csus.edu

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate, or to withdraw at a later time without consequence. The researcher may also end your participation at any time. By signing below, you are saying that you have read this page, understand the risks involved in this research and agree to participate.

NAME: _____________________________ SIGNATURE / DATE: ______________________________
APPENDIX C

Example of Program Goals and Expectations
Program Goals and Expectations

Please answer the following questions and return this form with your contract so that we may effectively plan your program.

Organization: SMUD  
Program Date: 5.13.09

Representative Name: [Redacted]  
Phone #: [Redacted]  
# of Participants: 18 confirmed

To help us plan the program, please provide a participant profile:

Why are you choosing to participate in the Challenge Center experience? To gain "insight" as to how we as a team can best work together.

How do the participants interact on a daily basis? We typically don't. We have meetings throughout the month, depending on sub-team efforts.

What are some positive/effective ways participants are currently interacting with one another? Meetings, email, Instant-Messaging.

What are some areas of participant interaction that need attention? "normal" protocol at meetings; learn to work with each other, leveraging each other's communication/working style to benefit the entire team.

What percentage of the day do you want spent on “low elements” (team building activities)? 60 %
What percentage of the day do you want spent on “high elements” (climbing activities)? climbing %
What percentage of the day do you want spent on debrief, discussion and reflection? 40 %
What changes/transformations would you like to see at the end of the program? I would like us work well together, considering different personalities (communication styles and needs); learn ways how we all can benefit from each other's input (no matter how "quietly" or "aggressively" they communicate or interact with one another); and be able to see and focus on big picture.

*PS: I don't understand the "climbing" part above; is this literally climbing trees/ropes? Or will this include physically climbing as an exercise to show us how to reaching up/out to achieve a goal?*
REFERENCES


Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, Inc.


