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**THE NATURE OF TRUST AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN FACILITATOR AND PARTICIPANT IN AN OUTDOOR  
EDUCATION EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract**

This study is based on a research study that examined the concept of trust as a critical characteristic in the relationship between facilitator and participant in an outdoor education experience. Data was collected from 35 graduate and undergraduate students in an outdoor education academic program at a small university in the south-east. Participants completed a 14 question survey that combined Likert scale response items with several open-ended short answer questions. Survey questions explored the characteristics necessary for a facilitator to possess in order to create a relationship of trust with participants, as well as defining the concepts of trust and relationships. Data analysis indicated no statistically significant difference in the responses between graduate and undergraduate students for all but one question. The results signify that a relationship of trust is a critical component to an outdoor education experience, and facilitators must possess certain competencies in order to foster these relationships. The nature of trust is a vital component in the foundation of an outdoor education experience.

**The Nature of Trust and its Impact on the Relationship  
Between Facilitator and Participant in an Outdoor Education  
Experience**

It's easier to define what experiential learning isn't than what it is (Gale Group, 2001). Long days have passed since sitting around the campfire singing songs and reveling in group hugs. While those activities still exist in some form in the realm of experiential learning, the landscape has changed quite dramatically. Experiential learning has become a sophisticated training tool that when properly implemented can effect enormous change within an individual or a group.

Experiential learning is defined by Carl Rogers (Gale Group, 2001) as any experience where there is personal involvement that is initiated and evaluated by the learner. When an individual is able to ask him/herself what he/she has experienced and how does it apply,

then experiential learning has taken place. And while the term “experiential learning” is relatively new, its roots are quite old. John Dewey, a noted philosopher of education, deemed that all genuine education comes through experience (Starnes, 1999). Experience matters, and it is experience that is at the core of learning. Dewey believed there to be a connection between education and personal experience (Cassidy, 2001). Placing an individual or group in an environment or setting that is natural supports this idea of learning through experience. An experience is what an individual or group turns it into (Hovelynck, 2003). It is a cycle where a concrete experience occurs, specific observation and reflection takes place, there is a formation of abstract concepts and generalizations are made, and these concepts are transfer to new learning situations (Priest & Wurdinger, 1999). It is a cycle upon which the field of outdoor education has its foundations.

The design and implementation of effective programs in outdoor education is of critical importance. In order to maximize the transfer of learning to new situations, programs must be carefully sequenced and processed accordingly. While the individual or group is at the center of the learning process, the facilitator in an outdoor education experience is a key component to increasing the potential for this transfer to occur. Facilitation is an “art and a science”, and Priest (1999) notes that specific competencies exist that are necessary for effective facilitation or leadership in the outdoors. These are defined as hard (technical), soft (organizational), and meta skills. Soft skills are typically described as interpersonal skills (Gilbertson, 1991), while meta skills are those that involve problem solving, judgment and communication. While activities in the field of outdoor education take place in a variety of settings, there are common elements in social construction of the range of what is desirable in outdoor leadership (Ringer, 1994). The facilitator who works towards the development of all three competency sets will be able to better support the transfer of learning that is the ultimate outcome of an outdoor education experience.

Program design centers focus on goals for the individual and for groups. The creation of relationships is one of many goals that a program may incorporate, and the opportunity for individuals to construct relationships with themselves and others is often provided by the facilitator. The facilitator shares a particular experience with the learner, and thus becomes part of the experience, not apart from it (Garvey, 1999). Many theories exist regarding how relationships develop, including those by Knapp and Duck (Borchers, 1999). Regardless what model one follows, it is impossible to overlook the sig-

nificance of creating positive relationships during an experience.

How then are relationships developed in an outdoor education experience? Relationships are built through the creation of trust. The concept of trust has been active in the language of persons throughout time (Arceneaux, n.d.). While it is a vital and essential ingredient to life, it is an abstract concept that has been difficult to quantify. The creation of a climate of trust is the foundation for effectiveness in any program (Mills, 2004). It is critical for facilitators to work towards building this climate. When trust begins to wane, misunderstandings and misrepresentations occur (Mills, 2004). A negative impact on the learning experience takes place, and its meaning is lost for those involved.

Building a climate of trust is a delicate and demanding (Mills, 2004). It is a fragile element in relationships and often does not come easily. Conditions must exist for the development to occur, and the facilitator in an outdoor education experience must support these conditions. A facilitator with characteristics and competencies that match the needs of the individuals within an experience will have the ability to develop positive relationships and in turn, increase the likelihood that transfer of learning will occur.

A review of the available literature supports the need for continued research into the concept of trust and how it impacts the transfer of learning in an outdoor education experience. The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of trust as a critical characteristic in the relationship between facilitator and participant in an outdoor education experience. The construction of a positive relationship with participants will have an impact on the perceptions of the participant as related to the outcomes of the experience.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Participants**

The sample population used in this study was a combination of 35 graduate and undergraduate students in the Outdoor Education program at Georgia College and State University. The researcher received permission from Outdoor Education faculty to administer the survey during instructional time. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the nature of the study prior to the administration of the survey. Only the surveys of those students who agreed to participate were used. The students were informed that they would receive no incentive to complete the survey, and that they had the right to have their surveys removed from the

study at any time. Participants were grouped by gender and level of study, either graduate (n=9) or undergraduate (n=25). Two-thirds of the population was male, and approximately one-third of the respondents were undergraduates.

The researcher used a convenience sampling in the research study. The nature of the sample was indicative of a typical case as all participants are involved in the field of outdoor education in the role of facilitator. The sample was limited to students in an academic program at the university level, and is therefore not random. The sample was chosen in a purposeful manner, but due to the convenience of the selected sample, there is no precise way of generalizing to a population and the chance of bias within the sample is increased.

#### **Instruments**

The researcher created a 14 question survey that included eight questions on a Likert scale (Appendix A). The Likert scale was useful as the statements included values in both a positive and negative direction, and the subjects were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with the statement. The scales of responses ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with three responses falling in the middle.

Three short response questions were included on the survey as well. These short response questions were semi-structured in nature, being specific in intent yet open-ended in order to gain individual insight regarding the concepts being studied. The two of the final three questions were incorporated in order to acquire nominal data related to level of schooling (i.e.: undergraduate or graduate) and gender (i.e.: male or female). The final question established acceptance for the participant's responses to be used in the research study.

#### **Procedures**

The process of selecting a survey population required the researcher to seek permission from Outdoor Education faculty to utilize instructional time for the survey administration. Permission was granted, and administration dates were scheduled. The administration for all participants was conducted during expedition trips, in authentic setting related to the nature of the research. Surveys were coded by number for data analysis purposes. This was completed following completion and collection of the surveys to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. After all surveys were completed and collected the researcher began the process of compiling and analyzing the resulting data. Microsoft Excel and were used in the analysis process. The completed surveys were destroyed upon completion of the data

analysis.

## **Design and Data Analysis**

The design of the study is mixed-method research in nature, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The survey instrument used combined closed-response questions with open-ended responses. The researcher tabulated responses to each question to obtain the data that was entered into Microsoft Excel and the statistical calculation program available at <http://www.physics.csbsju.edu/stats/>. A score of one was assigned to responses of strongly disagree; with the range of scores ascending to five for strongly agree. The scores resulted in a set of interval scale of measurement where the interval between numbers is one. The responses to each question were categorized by level and gender as well. The analysis used to examine the data was the Contingency Chi Square Test. Calculations were made using the Fisher Exact Test as well.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of trust as a critical characteristic in the relationship between facilitator and participant in an outdoor education experience. The construction of a positive relationship with participants will have an impact on the perceptions of the participant as related to the outcomes of the experience.

Data analysis of the difference in proportions at the  $p = .05$  level indicate that for questions one through eight, no significant difference between graduate and undergraduates exists except on question two. The question refers to the importance of participants building a relationship with the facilitator, which resulted in a  $X^2$  value of 4.52, where  $p = 0.033$  and the Fisher Exact Test yields a value of .055. If  $p$  is more than .05, then the apparent difference is due to sampling variation and not to any true difference between the groups. The resulting analysis for the data set is outlined in Table 1.

The analysis therefore signifies that no true difference exists between graduate and undergraduate students in their perceptions of trust as related to the characteristics of a facilitator. The exception to this conclusion is difference between graduate and undergraduate perceptions as related to the building of a relationship between the facilitator and participants.

Additional analysis was conducted for short-answer questions nine through 11. The data was categorized for trends or themes that existed within participant responses. Question nine sought to identi-

fy additional characteristics that a participant believes are important for a facilitator to possess. Technical knowledge and competency were indicated on multiple surveys, as were verbal and nonverbal communication skills, being personable, and being empathetic. Additional characteristics that participants deem significant include humor, flexibility in design and implementation, and confidence.

Questions 10 and 11 asked participants to define the terms relationship and trust, respectively. Frequent definitions of the term relationship included the concepts of connection and interaction between two or more people, particularly as related to commonalities or similar personalities. The word trust was integrated into numerous definitions as well. Similar overlap appeared in the definition of the term trust as related to repeated words. Dependency of care and belief in others were frequently noted, as were interdependency and mutual respect.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that no significant difference exists between graduate and undergraduate students in relation to the concept of trust and its impact on the relationship between facilitator and participants in an outdoor education experience. Graduate students do not agree, however, that building a relationship between the facilitator and participants is a necessary component of an outdoor education experience. The reasons behind this perception may be embedded in age and level of experience, as well as the belief that groups should become self-sufficient during the experience itself. The building of a relationship of trust is indicated to be of significance, and it is necessary for a facilitator to possess certain characteristics to support the creation of this relationship.

Whether the concept of trust has a significant impact on the transfer of learning cannot be determined from the concluded study. The study was limited by its sample and therefore a generalizing of the results is restricted to a population that includes students in an outdoor education academic program. The sample included participants who are actively aware of the importance of building relationships within an outdoor education experience. These individuals therefore exert a degree of a bias upon the resulting data.

The researcher was unable to find studies that examined the

role that trusts plays in the formation of relationships between facilitator and participants in an outdoor education experience. In referring to related literature the need for further research into the concept of trust is warranted. Critical question for examination include: How is trust defined by participants in an outdoor education experience? What conditions are necessary for relationships of trust to be constructed? What impact does trust have on a participants' transfer of learning? Based on the analysis of the data in this study, research should incorporate an examination of perceived and actual risk. The determination and evaluation of facilitator characteristics and competencies will support this research as well, and assist in creating a foundation upon which relationships in an outdoor education experience develop.

Trust is a critical characteristic for facilitators to develop in a relationship with participants. The creation of a relationship of trust has a positive impact on the transfer of learning in an outdoor education experience. Relationships are the foundation on which to build a successful experience, one that will have meaning and impact in the life of a participant. The establishment of commonalities and a connection with individuals and groups as a whole will support this endeavor, as will building trust. The ability to exhibit technical competency, to communicate effectively, to be personable and to be empathetic are characteristics necessary for a facilitator to demonstrate in order to assist the process. Developing these competencies will enable a facilitator in the creation of relationships of trust, and increase the potential impact that the experience has on the participant.



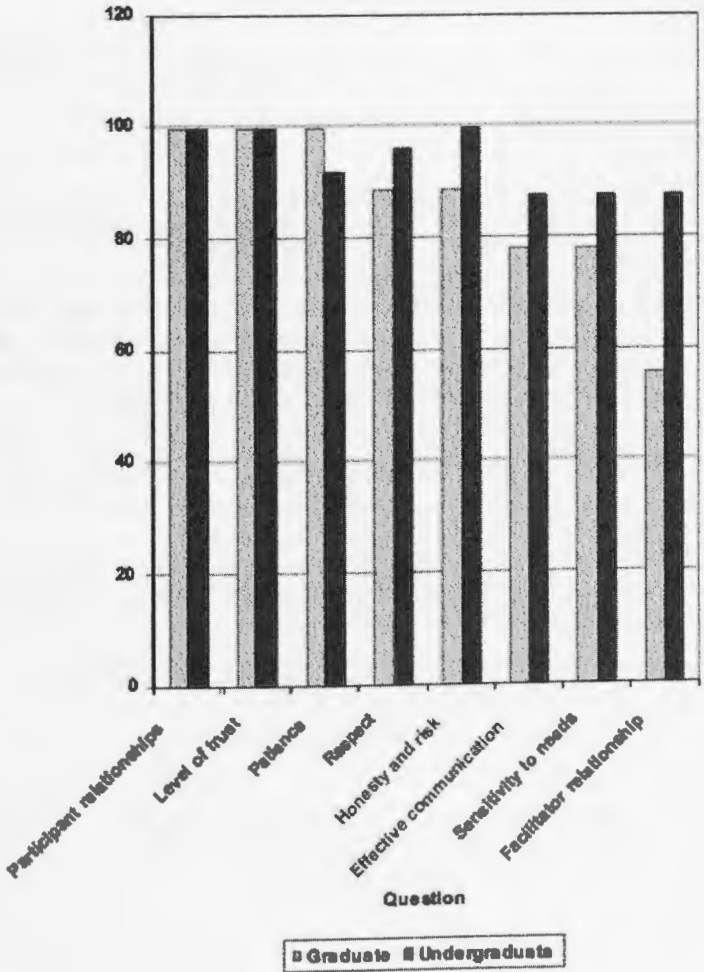
**Table 1**

*Results of Survey for 35 Respondents*

<b>Question 1</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>Participant Relationship</b>			
Graduate	100%	0%	0%
Undergraduate	100%	0%	0%
<b>Question 2</b>			
<b>Facilitator/participant relationships</b>			
Graduate	56%	33%	11%
Undergraduate	88%	11%	1%
<b>Question 3</b>			
<b>Level of Trust</b>			
Graduate	100%	0%	0%
Undergraduate	100%	0%	0%
<b>Question 4</b>			
<b>Respect</b>			
Graduate	89%	11%	0%
Undergraduate	96%	0%	4%
<b>Question 5</b>			
<b>Effective communication</b>			
Graduate	78%	22%	0%
Undergraduate	88%	12%	0%
<b>Question 6</b>			
<b>Sensitivity to needs</b>			
Graduate	78%	22%	0%
Undergraduate	88%	12%	0%
<b>Question 7</b>			
<b>Honesty and risk</b>			
Graduate	18%	11%	0%
Undergraduate	100%	0%	0%
<b>Question 8</b>			
<b>Patience</b>			
Graduate	100%	0%	0%
Undergraduate	92%	11%	0%

Figure 1

Percentage of positive (Agree and Strongly Disagree) responses on survey questions



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