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Chapter 1: Introduction to Challenge Courses

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<u>Introduction</u>

Have you struggled to find ways to reach difficult students that consistently refuse to engage in everyday classroom activities? Have you ever been at a loss to create more effective ways to manage a group? Have you ever wondered how to use peer pressure to create appropriate group norms or standards of behavior? Do you search for ways to engage group members in a self-directed process to accomplish larger educational goals? Challenge course programming might be your answer! Challenge course programs can standalone as an effective educational tool or serve as a supplemental method to support a larger educational effort. A properly organized, facilitated challenge course experience fosters a sense of adventure that immerses individuals in a rich, experiential process. As a result, participants become fully engaged in activity that lends itself to the development of transferable skills, knowledge and dispositions. Newfound realizations can be applied to future situations to improve all aspects of group or individual functioning.

<u>What is a challenge course?</u>

The term challenge course is used synonymously with a variety of terms such as: high ropes course, low ropes course, initiatives, group initiatives and group initiative activities (Attarian, 2001). In 1962, the newly established Colorado Outward Bound School utilized the first ropes course for educational purposes in the United States. A ropes course was also used around the same time in Puerto Rico, built by Outward Bound instructors, to train Peace Corps volunteers (Attarian, 2001). Early ropes course designs were modeled after military obstacle courses. The term ropes course reflected the

primary material, braided and twisted ropes, used to build these early courses. Since

then, the term challenge course has gained broader recognition to describe adventure-

based activities designed to facilitate specific, educational outcomes. Rohnke, Tait and

Wall (1994) provide the following contemporary definition: "A challenge course is an

experiential adventure program, which offers groups and individuals the opportunity to

participate in a series of activities involving mental, physical, and emotional risk taking"

(p.1).

A popular perception of a challenge course involves ropes, wires, cables and walls

towering twenty to sixty feet off the ground. Participants negotiate through a series of

challenges tied into climbing ropes, wearing harnesses, helmets and other technical gear.

This popular view evokes fear in some and sheer excitement in others. It is important to

understand that a challenge course experience does not necessarily require a specialized

facility as imposed by the popular perception. A classroom, hallway, courtyard or

convenient open space will serve the purpose. A myriad of activity choices, held in any

of these spaces, involving challenge, teamwork, problem solving and sense of risk

provides the basic ingredients for challenge course experiences. Properly trained leaders

following a sound, pedagogical process ensure that the challenge course experience

becomes a valid, educational endeavor. Challenge course programs are developing at an

increasing rate both in the United States and abroad. Before implementing this powerful

educational tool, educators have an ethical responsibility to develop a philosophical

foundation, methods and appropriate technical skills.

<u>The Origin of Challenge Courses</u>

In order to understand the origin of challenge course programs, the concept of adventure within an educational context must first be addressed. The concept of adventure has served as the driving philosophical force for the establishment of challenge course programs in our educational system. As far back as ancient Greece, Plato believed that education should be concerned with the development of virtue. Plato believed that young people could learn lessons of virtue through adventurous experiences (Hunt, 1999). William James, nineteenth-century philosopher believed in the virtues of fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, conscience, education, inventiveness, economy, wealth, physical health and vigor. James promoted the belief that young people should engage in adventurous activities to develop these virtues. Philosophers such as the Greeks and William James influenced Kurt Hahn, a German educator, English schoolmaster and founder of the Outward Bound movement. Hahn deeply believed that character development should be an important mission of formal education. Character development drove the philosophical under pinning of his boy's schools at Salem, Germany and Gordonstoun, England and eventually the Outward Bound movement (Horwood, 1999). For example, Hahn would ask his teachers to report on a number of student qualities beyond the typical academic performance. Some of these qualities included manners; sense of justice; ability to plan; facing obstacles such as discomfort, teasing, skepticism, peer pressure, ability to concentrate and lively spirit (Horwood, 1999). Outward Bound methods included rigorous activities such as sailing, hiking, morning runs and other physically demanding activities (Hogan, 1968). American educators who visited the Outward Bound schools in England witnessed the use of challenge courses as part of the

curriculum. They would be responsible for bringing the challenge course to the United States in the early 1960s.

Another movement in Europe should be mentioned that integrated challenge course type experiences into educational settings in the early 1900s. This movement was known as hébertisme, which was derived from the name George Hébert. From 1895-1903, Hébert served as a French Navy officer where he cared deeply about the physical conditioning of his sailors. He later became responsible for the physical training of the French navy. In 1913, he gave a demonstration of his training methods before the French Physical Education Congress (Cousineau, 1976). "Hébert's view on education was return-to-nature approach with emphasis on development of 'moral values and virile character'" (p.3). He was opposed to analytical exercise and controlled movements when nature offered so many opportunities for varied physical movements. He developed obstacle courses in natural areas that required the use of fundamental movements such as jumping, climbing, running, walking, crawling, balancing, throwing, lifting and carrying. In addition to emphasis on physical conditioning, hébertisme created opportunity to discover personal potential and limitations while moving in a natural environment. In 1949, hébertisme was first implemented in North America at Camp Ecole Trois-Saumons located near Québec City, Canada. Two Canadian army officers who served in France during WWII brought it to Canada. It has yet to be determined if Hébert's original thinking influenced Outward Bound challenge course programming (Cousineau, 1976).

The First American Challenge Courses

American educators interested in Kurt Hahn's educational model brought Outward Bound to the United States in an effort to immerse American youth in this new

brand of educational reform. The first Outward Bound School was established in Marble,

Colorado, which opened for business in 1962. The challenge course, along with many

other outdoor adventure activities, became an important part of the first Outward Bound

curriculum. "Tap" Ernest Tapley, designer and builder of the Marble base camp,

constructed the first Outward Bound challenge course in the United States in 1961.

Tapley was sent to the United Kingdom to take an Outward Bound course at Eskdale and

experienced a ropes course as part of his training. The British Outward Bound schools

borrowed the ropes course concept from the military (Miner & Bolt, 2002). Tapley

brought back what he had experienced and built the first course in an aspen grove with

the help of fourteen students from the Colorado Academy in Denver. Tapley also picked

up design ideas from his past service with the U.S. army's 10th Mountain Division.

British Outward Bound instructors, Higel Peacock and Ralph Cough later approved the

course and made a few minor adjustments (T. Tapley, personal correspondence, January

16, 2003). The entrance to the course was a forbidding 35-foot rope ladder. According

to Miner and Bolt (2002), the challenge course produced apprehension in the students the

same way rock climbing and rappelling did.

Tapley also served as mountaineer advisor for the Colorado Academy in Denver.

The headmaster and founder of the Colorado Academy, Chuck Froelicher, was also a

founding member of the Colorado Outward Bound School. Froelicher believed deeply in

the Outward Bound process and integrated key principles into his school's curriculum.

Froelicher asked Tapley and academy students build a small challenge course in a one-

acre wooded area on academy grounds area known as Sherwood Forest (C. Froelicher,

personal correspondence, January 3, 2003). Students participating in these first U.S.

challenge course experiences were put on belay and encouraged to take a practice fall so

student belayers could practice catching a fall. Students were debriefed after the event to

bring out the whole experience (T. Tapley, personal correspondence, January 16, 2003).

The use of challenge courses for educational purposes had taken root in the United

States!

Continued Push Toward Mainstream Education

Early American Outward Bound instructors began taking their expertise to other

settings. Programs were slowly being established in the late 1960s and early 1970's.

Outward Bound instructors built a challenge course at Lincoln-Sudbury High School in

Lincoln, MA. Mike Stratton, former Colorado Outward Bound Instructor, constructed a

few elements for the Carroll School near Walden Pond in MA. Stratton created a

climbing wall out of boulders, sometimes over 100 pounds each, by imbedding them into

a cinder block, gymnasium wall. Karl Rohnke, NC Outward Bound instructor, created a

challenge course for Southern Illinois University (K. Rohnke, personal correspondence,

January 16, 2003).

The Outward Bound phenomena also spawned an entire movement of adaptive

Outward Bound programs that promoted challenge course use. One of the most

influential organizations in challenge course development has been Project Adventure.

Project Adventure is noteworthy because its focus was on reforming the traditional

education system. Jerry Pieh, principal of Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School,

Massachusetts, had a genuine interest in educational reform. Jerry had helped his father,

Bob Pieh, start the Minnesota Outward Bound School. Jerry developed a deep

appreciation for the power of the Outward Bound experience (Prouty, 1999). Jerry and a

colleague, Gary Baker, submitted a grant proposal to the federal office of education to integrate Outward Bound into mainstream education. The new program, developed in 1971, was called Project Adventure (Prouty, 1999). Jerry was able to hire staff with Outward Bound background to help Hamilton-Wenham faculty develop the new curriculum.

Staff member Karl Rohnke and a group of after school high school sophomores built a challenge course used primarily in physical education classes (Rohnke, Tait, Wall, 1994). The course was built behind the school's football field in a stand of beautiful, mature beech trees. The course was constructed with whatever materials were at hand - goldline and manila hemp ropes, 1/2-inch cable and a ladder. The height of elements went only as high as the ladder or tree climbing would allow. High elements included a cable Zip Line, Two Line Bridge, Cat Walk, Commando Crawl, Belly Buster and Cargo Net Swing. Goldline belay ropes were hung through single alloy or steel carabiners. Low elements constructed included an All Aboard, Everybody Up Stumps, Vertical Pole and Tire, Tension Traverse, Barrel Pull, Wall, Beam, Spinning Spool, Hickory Jump, Sneaker Graveyard and Flea Jump. Debriefing the experience was primarily a question and answer session similar to what had been passed down from the Outward Bound process (K. Rohnke, personal correspondence, December 17, 2002).

The majority of the new curriculum focused on the 10th grade physical education class. "But, English, history, science, theater arts, and counseling were also explored in the context of what became to be known as 'adventure activities' (Prouty, 1999, p. 94)" Bob Lentz, former Outward Bound instructor, teacher and principal, became the first director of Project Adventure. "Bob found in the Project Adventure curriculum a way to

help students become more 'alive, alert, and responsible' inside schools, and to institutionalize the process" (Prouty, 1999, p. 94). In 1972, Karl Rohnke built the first Project Adventure indoor climbing wall for Newburyport, another northeastern high school (Prouty, 1999).

Birth Of An Industry

All courses in the 1960s and 1970s were constructed in-house reflecting individual ingenuity. No universal standards or formal risk management protocol existed to manage these programs (Attarian, 2001). No formal staff training existed, so experience was gained through trial and error. There were no national organizations promoting the use of courses, which left the early pioneers of challenge course programming isolated. It is estimated that in the early 1980s, up to 700-800 courses existed in the United States. Today, it is believed that over 15,000 courses operate in the United States (Attarian, 2001). The first formal gathering of challenge course professionals occurred in 1988 at the North Carolina Outward Bound School. In 1991, this seminal group of professionals decided to form a national organization to support the development and standardization of challenge course practices (Attarian, 2001). The organization is now known as the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT). The ACCT has formalized challenge course construction standards, certifies challenge course builders, offers national conferences, develops informational literature and manages a professional membership. Beyond the initial application used by Outward Bound and Project Adventure, challenge course programs are found in a wide-variety of settings. They include but are not limited to: camps, conference centers, hospitals,

correctional facilities, corporate training centers, youth agencies, religious institutions, municipal and county recreation departments, universities and drug prevention programs.

Philosophy of Challenge Courses

The Building Blocks

In order to understand the philosophical underpinnings of challenge course experiences, three concepts must be addressed: (a) experiential education, (b) small group dynamics or process, and (c) adventure. These constitute the primary ingredients necessary to support challenge course programs as an educational experience (see Figure 1). Using these building blocks, educators can facilitate student growth and development. Changes in student attitudes, self-perception, positive interpersonal relationships, improved communication skills and group development are common outcomes associated with appropriately designed experiences.

Experiential Education

First and most importantly, challenge course experiences are based on experiential education methods. Experiential education techniques are particularly effective in facilitating developmental outcomes because all domains, physical, psychomotor and affective, of the learner are addressed. Experiential methods meet the needs for all types of learners no matter how individuals grasp and processes information. The Association for Experiential Education defines experiential education as the following: "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and values from direct experience (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.). Experiential learning occurs when students engage in a concrete experience, reflect on the experience, analyze and gain insight from it, then apply new

learning in other situations. The student forms a connection to the topic so that it takes

on personal meaning. We all know that students tend to be more engaged when learners

see how the topic relates to them. In essence, the student forms a relationship with the

topic, which ensures a meaningful connection. For more detail, experiential learning

theory is described in one of the later chapters of this book.

Small Group Dynamics

All education is a personal but social process where individuals cooperate to

construct shared understandings and knowledge (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1992).

"The more pressure placed on students to achieve and the more difficult the material to

be learned, the more important it is to provide social support within the learning

situation" (Johnson, et al., p. 1:9). Engaging in challenge course experiences allows

students to construct knowledge in an active way while collaborating with peers so that

talents and competencies are developed. Challenge course experiences typically require

small groups to solve problems and face challenges through cooperative efforts. Students

are taught to be effective collaborators through challenge course experiences. Small

group interaction fosters interpersonal relationship development. Effective interpersonal

skills include sound communication skills and respect for individual differences. These

attributes contribute to effective teamwork. The experienced group facilitator also

understands stages of group development. The skilled leader assists groups through the

initial stages of forming and conflict so that stages of cohesion and productivity are

reached. Stages of cohesion and productivity are characterized as the time when group

cooperation is maximized.

Adventure

What makes challenge courses a unique brand of experiential education involves the concept of adventure. From a pedagogical perspective, adventure serves as a unique mechanism to facilitate student development. Adventure education is the tool used to immerse students of all learning styles into an experiential activity, which includes elements of risk and challenge. Risk and challenge represent key ingredients to facilitate change. Change is the catalyst for student development. Social scientists believe that youth see risk-taking behavior as a way to deal with developmental tasks of young adulthood (Ponton, 1997). Mitten (1994) believes that that adolescents dealing with low self-esteem engage in risky behavior to feel more powerful and alive. Situations involving risks tend to raise levels of anxiety, cause discomfort, confusion, dissonance, or stress. When this dissonance or disorientation occurs, it is possible that something meaningful can seep in when the defense system is less intact (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Adventure experiences, facilitated by trained educators, can be used to move individuals out of their comfort zones into a state of dissonance. In a caring, supportive environment, the vulnerable student can be guided into a growth zone of mastery and accomplishment (see Figure 2).

We spend most of our waking hours operating in our comfort zones. We socialize with the same people, wear our favorite clothing, eat familiar foods, frequent the same places, etc. When operating in our comfort zones, we are not pushed to experience new things that test who we are and what we know. It is possible to step out of our comfort zones when challenged, but unpleasant feelings usually surface. Overcoming feelings of doubt and anxiety can lead to success. Feelings of success and accomplishment

characterize the growth zone. An educator trained in the art of challenge course programming can safely facilitate movement from the comfort to the growth zone. For example, a student sitting in the same seat around the same group of friends each class and participating in routine activities is operating in her/his comfort zone. Minimal risks are taken when students interact.

To push students out of their comfort zones, the teacher might facilitate the class the following way - Students are creatively separated from old friends by being divided into groups of ten. Each group is presented a problem-solving activity, which includes elements of challenge and risk. The situation is unfamiliar and produces discomfort. This causes students to engage at a more meaningful level. Students have been stretched into the groan zone. After completing the activity, each group processes the experience and applies it to the class material. Students then naturally apply what they have learned beyond the classroom in other situations as a result of cognitive and emotional growth. They have reached the growth zone. The growth zone is where our self-perceptions and perceptions of the world are tested and expanded (see Figure 2). The skilled facilitator knows how to create a safe, supportive environment that allows students to make this move towards growth.

Balancing on a log thirty feet off the ground exemplifies a classic risk-taking activity found on a challenge course to expand the comfort zone. But, this dramatic example should not be stereotyped as the sole type of risk associated with challenge courses. Risk emerges in many forms both emotional and physical. Challenge course participants take risks when they open up to other group members. Risk is taken whenever thoughts and emotions are displayed in front of peers. Anytime participants

perceive an uncomfortable situation, physically or emotionally, risk is present. Risk

stimulates the need for trust. An important part of group effectiveness and cohesion is

developing and maintaining trust (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec 1992). Challenge course

activities create an environment that promotes group member interdependence based on

trust. What makes adventure education such a powerful method lies in the educator's

ability to use risk as a developmental tool for individual and group development.

Benefits:

Newberry and Lindsay (2002) assessed at-risk adolescents after participating in a

low-element challenge course program. They found that locus of control increased,

which suggests an increase in self belief that their behavior and ensuing consequences

were within their control. Therefore, better decision making is more likely to occur in the

future. Lieberman and DeVos (1982) found that youth who participated in adventure-

based counseling activities in the school system improved self-concept and demonstrated

an increase in positive attitudes toward school. Glass and Benshoff (2002) discovered

that school children ages 11 through 14 perceived an increase in group cohesion after

participating in a challenge course program. Group cohesion plays a role in group

formation, productivity and maintenance (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). Some social scientists

claim that group cohesion is the most important variable in group development

(Golembiewski, 1962; Lott & Lott, 1965). Small group experiences are vital to

adolescent development in relationship to peer influence and behavior (Ingersol, 1989).

As discussed earlier, small group work enables students to refine interpersonal skills and

collaboration skills.

Current Trends and Future Use

Challenge course programs can be found in a variety of environments serving diverse populations. Historically, we have seen traditional courses constructed as permanent outdoor facilities. The early prototypes have evolved significantly based on technology, diverse needs and builder creativity. For example, the New York City Outward Bound Center created a high ropes course in the masts of a sailing ship. High ropes courses can be found in ceilings over swimming pools and in the rafters of gymnasiums. Telephone poles are resurrected as the course infrastructure when trees are not available or appropriate. Huge telephone poles have been formed into tripods to construct courses when space is limited. Challenge course providers construct temporary high courses for weekend use in convention centers and have them dismantled by Monday morning.

Low elements, like the activities described in the first Project Adventure Course, can be permanent fixtures or portable events. Companies now manufacturer low elements and initiatives to be portable and even air travel friendly. These portable elements can be used in the traditional classroom or in a hotel lobby. An educator simply orders the desired activities over the Internet after watching a streamed video of its use. Workshops, professional seminars, certification courses, and other training opportunities exist throughout the country for anyone that seeks training as a facilitator or builder of challenge courses.

Evolving applications of challenge course programming continue to generate great enthusiasm. Modern courses can be designed to be fully accessible for individuals with disabilities. Hospitals and treatment centers have found great therapeutic value in

challenge course programming. Whether it's family issues, substance abuse, domestic violence or eating disorders, all issues can be addressed during a challenge course experience under the guidance of qualified leaders. Religious organizations apply the experience to their faiths. The popularity of challenge course programming has exploded in corporate America in an attempt to create more productive teams. Challenge course experiences can be designed for people over sixty or for children with Aids. Colleges and universities have created comprehensive leadership development programs around challenge course experiences. Rival, inner city gangs have been brought together on the challenge course to work out their differences in a more productive way.

As technology advances, so will our ability to design and build more sophisticated problem-solving activities that maximize perceptions of challenge and risk. Processing models become more sophisticated and effective as professionals develop their craft. Challenge course professionals have been diligent in developing effective risk management practices. It will be up to challenge course advocates to properly educate the general public of challenge course benefits and limitations. What is particularly exciting is the continued push to creatively integrate challenge course programming into mainstream education. The Baby Boomers and Generation X will be stepping aside as the Millennials begin to graduate from college and enter the workforce. Millennials learn differently – they value collaboration and peer group communication, are known as multitaskers (can do many things at once), have short attention spans (3 to 5 minutes) and can navigate through a vast sea of information (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Challenge course programming provides a dynamic median to reach these future learners. The words of Kurt Hahn continue to apply as educators embrace the philosophy that

experience is vital to learner development. "It is wrong to coerce people into opinions,

but it is a duty to impel them into experiences" (Hogan, 1968, p. 118).

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Figure 1. Fundamental building blocks necessary for a challenge course experience.

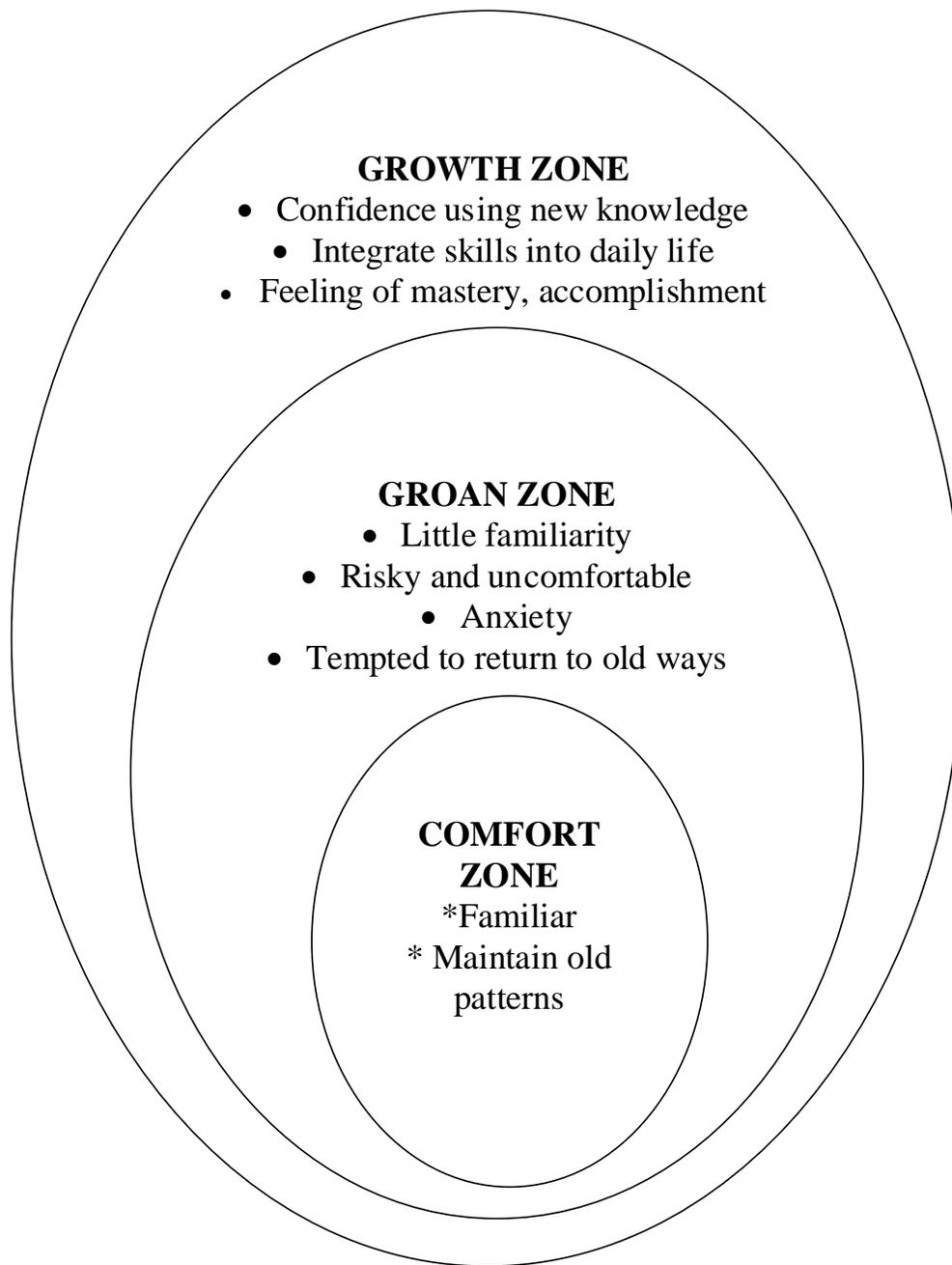Figure 2. Change Zones (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, p.20)

Figure 1

High Elements

Low Elements

Challenge
Course
Experience

Initiatives

Processing

Small Group Process

Adventure

Experiential Education

GROWTH ZONE
- Confidence using new knowledge
- Integrate skills into daily life
- Feeling of mastery, accomplishment

GROAN ZONE
- Little familiarity
- Risky and uncomfortable
- Anxiety
- Tempted to return to old ways

COMFORT ZONE
*Familiar
* Maintain old patterns

Figure 2