

# Challenge Activities for the Physical Education Classroom:



## CONSIDERATIONS

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**A** number of positive outcomes are associated with the experience of a challenge course in a variety of settings (Clem, Smith, & Richards, 2012; Conley, Caldarella, & Young, 2007; Davis, Ray, & Sayles, 1995; Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Newberry & Lindsay, 2000; Robitschek, 1996). More specifically, adolescent participants in a challenge course have experienced positive outcomes such as increased cohesion, increased skills in goal setting and strategizing for goal achievement (characterized as agency and pathways, respectively), and increased classroom involvement (Conley et al., 2007; Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Robitschek, 1996). Although informative research continues to unveil the positive outcomes of a challenge-course experience, it has mostly focused on those experiences that take place at a challenge-course or an adventure-based location. Schools, particularly physical education classes, could be an effective setting in which to provide the positive experience associated with challenge courses to a wider, more diverse population of adolescents.

**Students and the PE teacher should create an environment that allows for the interchange of new ideas, eliminates ridicule, explores the resources of the group, and encourages failure as a learning opportunity. This type of classroom management should start at the beginning of the year and continue throughout the school year, but it must be reinforced within the context of this new environment.**

A challenge-course environment is characterized by novel, unique experiences for the individual and/or a group. Although students may have participated in a particular activity before, they have never done it with the particular group and the exact set of previous experiences to guide them through the process. Additionally, facilitators and teachers create an environment in which it is safe to try new things without fear of judgment or ridicule; and what might otherwise be viewed as failure is seen as a learning opportunity.

A key feature of challenge-course experiences is that a group works toward a common goal. The specific goal changes based on the needs of the group, but ultimately, the group must work together toward one unifying goal. Several research articles have revealed positive outcomes associated with a challenge-course experience without the use of high elements. The materials required to provide physical education students with games, initiatives, and low elements for a challenge-course experience are relatively common and likely already exist in the physical education storage closet. Given the possibility of achieving these positive outcomes for adolescent physical education students in a school setting, it is the goal of this article to offer tools to physical educators for developing and implementing activities similar to those used in a challenge course in their physical education classes. The article also discusses specific considerations for creating a challenge-course environment in a physical education setting, such as location selection, sequence of activities, and how to guide and debrief students. While this article will provide a few examples of applicable activities, more thorough

and detailed examples are provided in *Challenge Activities for the Physical Education Classroom: Affective Learning Domains* **AQ2**, and these examples are widely available from a variety of sources.

## **Creating a Challenge-Course Environment in a Physical Education Setting**

The common challenge-course experience includes games, initiatives, low elements and high elements (Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). These activities vary based on group goals and are facilitated by trained leaders in a purposeful sequence (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). Games are often used to help individuals in a group get to know one another better and socialize, while initiatives are games that involve problem solving geared toward developing group trust and cooperation (Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). Low elements occur on or near the ground and require preconstructed equipment. High elements occur off the ground and require some sort of belay system for safety purposes (Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005).

A common component of outdoor education is the consideration of changing the environment to help create an atmosphere in which learning can occur (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). A central tenet of challenge courses is the goal for participants to *transfer* what they learn and experience to school, home or other extra-curricular activities (Holyfield & Fine, **AQ3** 1997; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The concept of getting participants out of their “comfort zone” can be somewhat controversial, so physical education teachers should focus on the positive aspects of a changing environment, while still ensuring that their students feel safe and open to change (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005). The likelihood that all physical education students will have an opportunity to travel to a challenge course or an adventure-based setting is small. Therefore, this article discusses the qualities of a challenge course that can be brought into a classroom, gymnasium, auditorium or outdoor field.

### **Selecting a location**

After selecting a location to facilitate the activities, the first step is for the physical education teacher to examine the environment for safety concerns such as holes and debris. If traveling away from school grounds is not an option, a location should be selected that can provide some novelty while still meeting the space needs. If weather and class time permit, go outside. If the teacher is unable to travel or go outside, a classroom, auditorium, gymnasium or cafeteria may be suitable. The goal is to provide a new and unique experience for students.

It is helpful to discuss the change in location with students, so they can develop appropriate expectations for how the environment may be different from what they normally experience. Explain that they are being taken somewhere new for class because they are going to try something different. Challenge them to work together in this new place and to create an environment in which everyone can be involved. This process is rooted in the idea of encouraging people to move outside of

their comfort zone. As the group works together to deal with a given challenge, changes in their “feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and behavior patterns occur” (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, p. 23). It is vital to balance this dissonance or incongruity, so students feel safe enough to make those changes.

### **Sequencing activities**

Students and the PE teacher should create an environment that allows for the interchange of new ideas, eliminates ridicule, explores the resources of the group, and encourages failure as a learning opportunity. This type of classroom management should start at the beginning of the year and continue throughout the school year, but it must be reinforced within the context of this new environment. Additionally, making students a part of the process of developing this supportive environment will enhance their group culture and commitment to keeping it positive for everyone (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). Set students up for success by choosing activities that develop the qualities for which the teacher is looking, and build on those skills gradually from one activity to another.

First, begin with activities that help students get to know one another beyond first names (e.g., Human Geography, Categories, Never Have I Ever, etc.) and help them find commonalities and resources within the group of which they might have previously been unaware. Second, move into games that begin to challenge them to work together but are still overtly fun, casual and easy to complete successfully (i.e., cooperative tag games such as Tusker Tag, Bear/Fish/Mosquito). Third, take time to talk about the culture of the group and how each individual can positively affect the group before moving into more difficult, problem-solving tasks.

### **Guiding the experience**

Participating in activities that make students think, problem-solve and work together could provide a beneficial experience in and of itself. However, challenge-course experiences rely on a facilitator who helps orient the goals for a group, navigate challenges or tasks, and reflect on the experience. It

is essential for the teacher to set up each activity with rules or guidelines, a clear goal and important safety considerations. If students have questions, any guidelines that were established at the beginning of the activity should be consistently followed and students’ strategies should not be influenced unless there is a safety concern. Pay attention to the way the students work together to develop strategies, how they implement them, and how they determine whether or not they met their goals. Make sure to close the activity by discussing the experience. There are a few common approaches to this process. The “what, so what, now what” approach can be found in *Cowstails and Cobras 2: A Guide to Games, Initiatives, Ropes Courses, and Adventure Curriculum* by Karl Ronke (1980). Additionally, in *Open to Outcome: A Practical Guide for Teaching and Facilitating Experiential Education*, Jacobson and Ruddy (2004) **AQ4** provide a five-question process. The idea is that students should be guided through a discussion at the end of the activity covering what happened, why it was important, and how they can use that experience moving forward. The discussion of the experience is essential to the learning process, especially for achieving outcomes that extend beyond the experience.

### **Debriefing the experience**

Debriefing the experience is an essential piece for student reflection on the activities in which they participated (Cain, Cummings, & Stanchfield, 2004; Knapp, 1992). Debriefing is a term used in outdoor/experiential education to describe a question-and-answer session. Debriefing is important because it helps students connect the lessons they learned during the activities to the outside world. If students were not allowed to reflect on their experiences and relate them to other situations, then learning opportunities would be lost (Knapp, 1992).

There are many approaches and models for debriefing (Cain et al., 2004; Knapp, 1992). For example, the “frontloading,” “metaphor cards,” “shuffle left, shuffle right” and “body part” debrief methods are just a few different educational methodologies that could be used. However, the model to which students typically relate best is the “traffic” debrief. The three colors on

the stoplight can be used as metaphors for behaviors: What are you doing well (green light)? What do you need to be careful of (yellow light)? What do you need to stop doing (red light)? Present a stoplight to the group to set the stage for targeted metaphoric processing. When a group has started to show negative behavior patterns or if a conflict arises, use the metaphor of the stoplight to debrief the situation. Frontload the discussion with examples for each color. The teacher could also have the group give suggestions for each color. The following are examples of processing questions and information that relate to the stoplight.

- Red: “What things are happening in the group that need to *stop* for us to be more successful?” The usual answers are to stop teasing, horseplay-ing, put-downs, blaming, etc.



## CHALLENGE COURSE ACTIVITY PLAN CHECKLIST

### 1. PREPARE FOR THE ACTIVITIES

- Gather necessary props and equipment and assessing site for safety
- If planned for outdoors, develop a backup plan.

### 2. PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW TO THE GROUP ABOUT ACTIVITIES

- Share the goal(s) for the day. This is an important part of any challenge-type lesson. We want to develop a clear goal that aligns to the activities we have planned. For more resources visit (Symonds, M & Tapps, T. (2016). Goal-prioritization for teachers, coaches and students. A developmental model. *Strategies: Journal of Physical and Sport Educators*. 29(3). 34-38.)
- Share the goal(s) for the overall experience. If using a series of lessons, we want to make sure we connect the lessons. We want the activities to be linked, rather than "one shot" events. This helps focus the learner to build from one activity to another.

### 3. REVIEW THE SAFETY GUIDELINES

- Sequencing and order of events.
- Challenge by choice.
- Spotting and team responsibilities.

### 4. WARM-UP AND ICE BREAKER ACTIVITIES

- Make sure all participants are involved.
- Control the group interaction so that it is dominated by individuals.
- Keep track of time per activity.

### 5. TEAM BUILDING AND PROBLEM SOLVING ACTIVITIES

- Identify the development need.
- Aims of the activities are clear.
- Success measures are identified.

### 6. DEBRIEFING

- Identify what went well.
- Receive feedback on behavior.
- Allow for reflection.

### 7. WRAP UP AND PREVIEW NEXT SESSION

- Discuss the objective and outcomes of the next lesson.
- Explain how the outcomes learned from the activity ties into the next lessons.

### 8. CLEAN-UP

- Clean and properly store equipment.
- Check all objects or facility amenities for damage or maintenance needs.

Figure 1. A sample challenge course activity plan checklist **AO5**

- Yellow: “What are things we need to be *careful* of as we continue?” Suggestions have included keeping everyone safe, listening to all ideas, being aware of personal choices and boundaries, etc.
- Green: “What are things we want to *go* for?” Examples could be group goals as well as behavior suggestions. Ideas have included being respectful, encouraging more, setting time limits, etc.

If it would not be a distraction, the stoplight can be handed out to a specific individual who will monitor the ideas for the group. This student can be asked to report on what they observed at the end of the activity or session. For example, the student designated to carry the stoplight may be asked to let the group know any time he or she sees an infraction of the established behavior norms. He or she could call a group discussion, point to the yellow light and say, “We had stated we wanted to be careful of listening to everyone’s ideas before we started. Are we listening to everyone?” (Cain et al., 2004).

An important thing to consider when implementing experiential education activities is to provide students with opportunities to process or reflect on their educational experiences. The educational philosopher John Dewey (1933), who is known as one of the forefathers of experiential education, believed that to truly learn from experience, there must be time for reflection. Processing helps students make connections between their educational experiences and real-life situations. It helps them recognize their skills and strengths by naming them. By recognizing and naming the skills and strengths used in an experience, students become more cognizant of their inner resources that can be used in future life situations. The practice of reflection itself is one of the most useful human skills in that it develops insight but is one of the more difficult tools to teach and learn. Experiential activities followed by processing help students to develop these insight skills (Knapp, 1992).

## Challenge–Course Activity Plan Checklist

Figure 1 represents a checklist that instructors or teachers can utilize to walk through the process of establishing challenge-course activities in physical education or other school settings. This checklist serves as a quick and easy reference sheet to highlight the key tasks to be completed to successfully establish challenge-course activities. Many physical education teachers already have the space and equipment to provide their students with a challenge course-like experience. Specific activities and strategies related to these goals are widely available. Internet searches for “challenge activities,” “cooperative games,” or “initiative games” as keywords will direct the physical education teacher to a variety of free activity options that can be adapted to fit the specific challenge-course environment that has been created. Using the guidelines presented in this article, teachers can create an environment that allows students to develop increased cohesion, skills in goal setting and strategizing for goal achievement, and increased classroom involvement (Conley et al., 2007;

Glass & Benschhoff, 2002; Robitschek, 1996), thereby aiding students to develop skills that apply in all areas of life.

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