Promoting Student-Centered Learning in Experiential Education

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Experiential educators claim to value student-centered learning, yet the values, as evidenced in practice, are often teacher-centered. The purpose of this article is to increase awareness of the inconsistencies between espoused values and values in practice effecting teacher-and-student power relationships during the facilitation of experiential programs. The literature review includes related philosophical topics, a summary of what other professionals in the field have written about student-centered facilitation, and an overview of eight generations of facilitation. The author argues that teacher-centered facilitation is problematic in experiential education and justifies increasing the use of student-centered facilitation practices. Suggestions are provided for: (a) establishing forums for dialog about student-centered facilitation, (b) incorporating more student-centered facilitation practices, and (c) considering student-centered learning during program development and facilitator training. The author concludes that the profession’s very commitment to integrity necessitates that we, as experiential educators, take action in order to ensure that our programs become more student-centered.

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There is a fundamental question that should be carved in stone over every school entrance to remind us all, daily, of a problem we must battle on a continual basis. That question: “Who processes the information within?” At the moment, in too many classrooms, it is teachers using texts in ignorance of the fundamental educational corollary to that question: “The extent to which the learner processes the information to be acquired is the extent to which it is acquired.” (Wigginton, 1986)

Wigginton (1986) strikes at the heart of the problem addressed in this article—for education to be at its best, the learner must be the one who processes the information from educational experiences. Student reflection on experience is deeply embedded within experiential education paradigms, but incongruence exists between what experiential education claims to value and what experiential education is in practice. It seems remarkable that one widely recognized facilitation technique, where the teacher speaks on behalf of the experience (Priest & Gass, 1997), can co-exist with the Association for Experiential Education’s (AEE) definition of experiential education, which includes a number of principles that support student-centered learning such as, “throughout the experiential learning process, the learner [italics added] is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning” (AEE, n.d.). On one hand, we claim to value student-centered reflection, yet our values, as evidenced in practice, are often teacher-centered.

The logic behind the author’s claim is as follows: (a) The process of experiential education is commonly considered to be an “action-reflection” cycle (Joplin, 1995, p. 15); and (b) one of the foremost assumptions of experiential learning is, that it is “student rather than teacher based” (Joplin, p. 20), and the learner’s experience is the valid basis for knowledge (Crosby, 1995; Joplin, 1995); further, (c) AEE iterates that, “throughout the experiential learning process, the learner [italics added] is actively engaged in...being creative and constructing meaning” (AEE, n.d.); however, (d) in practice, experiential educators often assume authority for directing what students learn during facilitation (e.g., teacher led discussions) (Bacon, 1983; Bell, 1993; Brown 2002a, 2002b; Estes & Tomb, 1995; Priest, 1996; Vokey, 1987); thus (e) it is often the teacher, not the student, who has more power during reflection on experience; and (f) the way that teachers use this power to convey their own messages while processing experiential activities makes student reflection, as it occurs in practice, more teacher-centered than student-centered.

Interestingly, while highly skilled experiential educators readily acknowledge this inconsistency in discussions (personal communication, Mike Gass, November, 2001), it has
been difficult to sustain substantive discourse about the need to examine if and/or how teachers wield power over students during experiential learning. Why is this? The author argues that most experiential educators and students operating in Western educational traditions are socialized into epistemologies that value teachers as authorities, so neither teachers nor students are very aware of this inconsistency. Our socialization causes us to see ourselves as more student-centered than we actually are. That is, teacher-controlled processing of experiential activities fits our world view of what teacher-student relationships should look like. Further, it is probable that while experiential educators unintentionally fall into this habit of assuming power over student learning, increased awareness of this problem will promote their desire to engage in conversations directed at increasing the use of student-centered facilitation practices. While generations of facilitation have evolved significantly over the past 40 years (Bacon, 1983, 1987; Doughty, 1991; Gass & Priest, 1993; Itin, 1995; Priest & Gass, 1997; Priest, Gass, & Fitzpatrick, 1999; Priest, Gass, & Gillis, 2000), experiential educators will benefit from critical reflection about where power resides—with the student, with the teacher, or with student-teacher partners in learning—as they facilitate experiential programs. Skilled experiential educators can make conscious choices that empower students to take control of their own learning, and meaningful learning can be increased to the extent that experiential educators can facilitate learning experiences that are more student-centered.

The purpose of this article is to increase awareness of inconsistencies between espoused values and values in practice, effecting teacher and student power relationships during the facilitation of experiential education programs. Awareness is a first step toward meaningful change, and this article is a catalyst for generating more conversations about this issue. Another goal is to increase the use of student-centered facilitation techniques in experiential education and facilitator training programs. This article does not seek to establish the importance of student reflection in experiential learning, as this has been more than adequately covered elsewhere (see Joplin, 1995; Greenaway, 1993; Knapp, 1992; Priest et al., 2000; Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass, 2000). The tone of this article is intended to be provocative in order to stimulate discussion. Further, the author admits in advance to certain generalizations and exaggerations for the sake of clarity of argument. My central thesis is supported by a literature review that contains related philosophical topics, a summary of what other professionals in the field have said about student-centered teaching, and discussion about generations of facilitation as they relate to student-centered learning. Suggestions for ways experiential educators can facilitate student-centered learning are included. The article concludes with implications for program development and the training new experiential educators.
Definitions and Key Concepts

The following definitions and key concepts are used in this article:

1. **Facilitation** includes, “anything and everything you [the facilitator] do before, during, or after the learning experiences to enhance people’s reflection, integration, and continuation of lasting change” (Priest et al., 2000, p. 19).

2. **Processing** is a guided reflection session that takes place following an experiential activity that typically consists of a circular discussion where the leader poses questions to the participants and restates answers (Brown, 2002b). Other forms of processing include drama, dance, journal writing, and painting (see Greenaway, 1993; Sugerman et al., 2000). Processing is often used interchangeably with facilitation, but for the purposes of this article, **facilitation** refers to the process of guiding students through the entire learning experience. **Processing** refers only to conducting a discussion or activity as a means to reflect upon, learn from, and change as a result of experience (Priest et al., 2000).

3. **Reflection** is a series of sequential steps in a process that a person goes through following an experience, which includes: (a) reorganizing perceptions, (b) forming new relationships, and (c) influencing future thoughts and actions in order to learn from an experience (Sugerman et al., 2000).

4. **Student-centered** (used in conjunction with processing, learning, or teaching) describes a learning process where much of the power during the experience resides with students. In some cases, students and teachers are collaborators, sharing equal power. Student-centered is used in this article in the tradition of the Dewey Laboratory School, where children were involved in group activities that were designed to be similar to how people learned in real life—usefulness and relevance were built into the system (Menand, 2001). Further, student-centered education is appropriate at any age. **Student** is used throughout this article but is interchangeable with other terms including participant and learner.

5. **Teacher-centered** (used in conjunction with the words processing, learning, or teaching) describes a learning process where the power resides with the teacher. Teacher is used interchangeably with other terms including experiential educator, facilitator, instructor, or leader.

Review of Related Literature

Other professionals in the field have written about student-centered facilitation, but to date, the literature has not resulted in sustained conversations aimed at increasing the use
of student-centered facilitation practices. The literature review covers three areas: (a) First, there are two related philosophical topics that add clarity to the argument; (b) next, comments of those who have previously questioned the balance of teacher and student power in experiential education are summarized; and (c) thirdly, the results of one study, which examined this situation, are discussed. The literature review concludes with a discussion of eight generations of facilitation as they relate to the student- and teacher-centered concept. Collectively, this literature sets the stage for the action section of this article—increasing awareness of, and sustaining dialog about, student-centered facilitation, and making suggestions for increasing the use of student-centered techniques in experiential education and facilitator training programs.

Related Philosophical Topics

Philosophy is used in this article as a tool to assist experiential educators in becoming better facilitators, and two related philosophical topics help explain why teacher-centered facilitation does not fit within the experiential education paradigm. These topics are presented as: (a) a review of Dewey’s philosophy about the importance of experience and the student’s role in learning from experience, and (b) an explanation of why epistemologically congruent experiential education programs need to use student-centered facilitation techniques.

Centrality of experience. First, the central role of experience in learning provides a philosophical basis for the experiential education profession. Dewey noted that, “All genuine education comes about through experience” (Dewey, 1938/1988). However, Dewey did not imply that all experiences were equally educative. Whether or not an experience is educative depends upon the quality of the experience, whether or not it is engaging to the student [italics added] and if the experience has continuity with the student’s further experiences (Dewey, 1938/1988). Dewey was not proposing to elevate “doing” over “thinking,” but rather he looked at doing and thinking as just practical distinctions one makes about the learning process as the learner adjusts to tensions that arise when s/he engages in the world (Menand, 2001). Crosby (1995) noted, according to Dewey, the goal of education was for the student to be able to understand and use experience, and this was achieved when students developed the critical thinking skills necessary to examine their experiences. Thus, the teacher’s role is to facilitate students’ learning by engaging them in experiences that are fundamentally reflective because of their relevance to students’ lives. “After resolution comes reflection [by the student], on the movement [experience] so that what is learned may be generalized and used again” (Crosby, p. 79). Further, as Hunt (1995) pointed out, Dewey does not downplay the role of reflection in learning. Dewey does, however, move away from education’s traditional preoccupation with the mind and the bias inherent in elevating thinking over doing (Menand, 2001). Thus, the importance of experience, and the student’s role in critically reflecting on and learning from experience are clearly expressed and supported through the existing literature.
Epistemological methods. The second topic addressed by the literature explains why epistemologically congruent experiential education must value students’ roles in both their experiences and their subsequent reflection on those experiences. Epistemological methods that value the teacher as authority are incongruent with the commitment of experiential education to student-created knowledge. When a teacher directs student reflection by telling them what they learned, students are not expected (or required) to think for themselves about what the experiences could mean. Therefore, they are not empowered to learn how to learn from their experiences (Estes & Tomb, 1995). In a similar vein, Vokey (1987) discussed how Outward Bound’s uncritical adoption of psychological language and models has compromised its commitment to self-reliance. Vokey noted—to the degree the instructor controls metaphors and student processing, instructors and students are not collaborators in the learning process. Teacher control of what is learned, no matter how well intentioned, conveys a message of control over students rather than student empowerment. Therefore, when in the role of authority, teachers are reinforcing dominant paradigms that lessons are dispensed from teachers rather than discovered by students through a process of meaningful experience and critical reflection.

Questioning the Balance of Teacher and Student Power in Experiential Education

A number of experienced teachers have questioned the balance of power between teacher and student in experiential education (Bacon, 1983; Bell, 1993; Estes & Tomb, 1995; Priest & Gass, 1997; Vokey, 1987). Bacon acknowledged that during debriefing sessions students often say what they think others want to hear; and instructors are so eager to teach about a particular lesson that their eagerness causes them to move too quickly to meet their own goals. This may occur without the instructor having ever determined what the actual effects of the experience were on the needs of the students. As Vokey notes, when teachers coerce people into opinions rather than providing educative experiences they covertly provide appropriate metaphors and language that assume the teacher knows what the students need more than the students themselves. He calls upon Outward Bound to re-examine how “the priorities inherent in the assumptions underlying behavioristic language and models of education concern not empowerment, but control” (Vokey, p. 21).

Bell (1993) observed that when teachers hear someone talk about their experience in ways that do not fit the teacher’s existing theories, they often redirect what was said into something that fits what they know. She called for experiential educators to ask hard questions about “Whose memories are privileged in the discourse of ‘the group,’ and how am I [the teacher] complicit in this in my practice as a facilitator” (Bell, p. 23)? Estes and Tomb (1995) proposed that teacher control and over-intellectualizing in experiential education were taking away from students’ self-reliance. Building on his previous work, Priest (1996) called for
closer examination of the debriefing component of experiential programs, and its positive and negative effects on participants. His belief was that as experiential educators have been pressured to accomplish more in less time, they have increasingly come to rely on prescriptive approaches that may not meet students’ needs and may take away from learning. Priest further speculated:

Is a prescriptive program truly experientially educative? Because the facilitator has power to decide their agenda for discussion, does specific debriefing prevent truth from arising “within” the learners? Or does it allow the learners to focus more on their issues because the facilitator knows what is best for them? (Priest, p. 40)

Brown (2002a, 2002b) took up these questions in his study on the balance of power during debriefing sessions in one typical adventure program in Australia.

**Brown’s Study of Social Order During Facilitation in an Adventure Education Program**

Brown (2002a, 2002b) utilized conversation-analytic methodology to observe and analyze processing. What he observed was that the teacher created his preferred version of reality through the use of formulations and public re-voicing of ostensibly student-created knowledge during debriefing sessions. Brown observed that the use of paraphrases, widely advocated in experiential education literature, consistently operated as mechanisms that allowed the teacher to create a preferred version of reality from students’ answers. The teacher routinely exhibited the following teacher-centered behaviors when he: (a) evaluated student responses as right and wrong, (b) paraphrased students’ comments into acceptable answers by stating what “the student really meant,” (c) allocated turns at talk, and (d) directed students’ talk to the teacher rather than to each other (Brown, 2002a, 2002b). Brown speculated that none of these behaviors appeared to be atypical, and they were likely common in most other adventure programs where talk circles are routinely used. Brown (2002b) concluded, “the explication of how power relationships are built and sustained necessitates a re-evaluation of existing literature on the role of the leader in the facilitation process” (p. 110). He called for experiential educators to “critically reflect on practice with a view to exploring other avenues [than talk circles] for facilitating learning” (Brown, 2002a, p. 293). He concluded that his validation of “what is being done” (in terms of teacher-centered learning) could serve as a precursor to understanding what should be done (in terms of student-centered learning).

**Eight Generations of Facilitation and Student-Centered Learning**

To date, there are eight recognized generations of facilitation in the experiential education literature, and each generation can be labeled as primarily teacher-centered or student-
centered. First, the four earliest generations, similar to those proposed earlier by Bacon (1983), and Doughty (1991), are discussed as one group (Priest & Gass, 1997). A second group, generations five through seven, all tend toward teacher-centered methods (Itin, 1995; Priest & Gass, 1997). Third, the eighth and newest generation, popularized by Priest et al. (1999), returns to a student-centered model after speculation and experimental validation by Priest and Lesperance (1994) that self-facilitation was more effective than teacher-facilitation.

The first generation, “letting the experience speak for itself,” is identified as appropriate for recreational programs where the primary goal is fun. This generation is primarily student-centered, because the teacher’s role is to conduct properly sequenced, well-designed activities, and it is up to the students to derive meaning from their experiences. The second generation, appropriately named, “speaking on behalf of the experience,” is a method designed for educational programs. This generation is primarily teacher-centered, and the teacher’s role is to provide students with feedback. The teacher tends to tell students what they did well, what they need to work on, what they learned, and how they can apply their knowledge in the future. Priest and Gass (1997) cautioned that this second generation runs the risk of alienating students and hampering learning. The third generation, “debriefing the experience,” is a method designed for educational programs that is supposed to circumvent this problem of student alienation. Here, the teacher’s role is to ask questions, encourage students to answer and take ownership for thinking about what they have learned. While this generation is ostensibly student-centered, the author argues that, in practice, it often becomes teacher-centered (see the problems observed by Brown, 2002a, in the previous section). The fourth generation, “directly frontloading the experience,” is a method designed for educational programs that allows the teacher to focus more on experience and less on intellectualizing about experience. The teacher’s role is to highlight or “load” the learning immediately prior to experience by covering key learning points during a pre-activity briefing. The debrief then becomes “direction with reflection,” re-emphasizing learning points that occurred throughout the experience. To the degree the teacher decides what students need to learn, and does the loading, this generation is teacher-centered. However, this fourth generation has the potential to be student-centered as well. To the degree that students are involved in deciding what they need to learn, and collaborate with the teacher to frontload their experiences, this fourth generation can be student-centered.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh generations are all teacher-centered methods that involve increasing amounts of client deception for the purpose of accomplishing programmatic goals. Generation five, “isomorphically framing the experience;” generation six, “indirectly front-loading the experience” (both described by Priest and Gass, 1997); and generation seven, “using hypnotic language” (described by Itin, 1995), are all considered advanced facilitation techniques best employed by highly trained experiential educators. The ethical application...
of these generations requires a complete and accurate needs assessment (see Bacon, 1987; Priest & Gass, 1997). Priest and Gass pointed out that in order to make isomorphs effective, the teacher must really know students’ setting, language, and background issues. Generations five through seven are designed for use in programs that have specific client goals, which are acknowledged at the front end by the clients (as is the case in some corporate and therapeutic programs). Ethical precautions are in order when applying the fifth, sixth, and seventh generations because they involve varying amounts of student deception (see Hunt, 1986). Experiential educators should seriously consider if student-centered facilitation methods could better accomplish program goals because student-centered methods will likely prove less alienating and may increase the probability that lessons learned will be retained by the students (Priest & Lesperance, 1994).

Priest et al. (1999) popularized the eighth and newest generation, called “self-facilitation.” This generation operationalized Greenaway’s (1993) proposal that a future generation of facilitation should involve learners as facilitators of their own experiences. Priest and Lesperence (1994) discovered that a corporate group, which chose to self-facilitate by using funneling techniques taught during an experiential program back in the work place, resulted in continually higher gains in postcourse teamwork levels. While this is just one study, it empirically validates Greenaway’s idea that student-centered facilitation would be more effective. Experienced facilitators, such as Priest et al. (2000), concluded that an important part of facilitator ethics is respect, which includes “respect[ing] clients’ rights to make decisions as well as helping them understand the consequences of their choices” (p. 17). The eighth generation represents a way to keep the increased focus on the value of experience from generation four (frontloading), and combine it with the benefits of student-centered facilitation. This is accomplished by empowering students to be responsible, at least in part, for deciding what needs to be learned and implementing a continuous learning process that can carry over into other life arenas.

Collectively, the literature creates a compelling case that teacher-centered facilitation is a pervasive problem in experiential education. The resolution of this problem requires increased awareness and sustained conversations about teacher and student-centered facilitation practices. The questions that arise, which are subsequently addressed, include: (a) In which forums should this conversation take place? (b) How can we, as experiential educators, incorporate more student-centered practices in our facilitation? and (c) What implications does this information have for program development and facilitator training?

**Discussion**

One purpose of this article was to make a compelling case for why experiential educators need to use more student-centered facilitation practices. Raising awareness of a problem
is the first step toward creating meaningful change. Allow me to raise awareness by answering the following question: Why should experiential educators have more conversations about student-centered learning, even though it is already an explicit value within experiential education?

If we, as experiential educators, want to offer our students the best possible education in the form of experienced-based learning (which arguably provides the best form of learning for life), we have an obligation to ensure that our programs excel in all respects. To the extent that experiential educators assume power over students by over-controlling their reflection on experience, they devalue both the experience and the students' role in their own learning. The resultant effect is that learning experiences are only a shadow of what they can be. However, we, as experiential educators, can ensure that experienced-based learning excels by utilizing student-centered facilitation techniques. In so doing, experiential educators can facilitate learning that is epistemologically and value congruent. When student-centered techniques are used to both guide the experience, and students' subsequent reflection on experience, experiential education will be at its best. Student autonomy, critical thinking, and self-reliance can be encouraged throughout the action and reflection cycle. Thus, experiential educators consciously using student-centered techniques can ensure that experiential learning is first rate by providing students with more opportunities to take meaningful roles in their own learning. By increasing awareness of this important issue, experiential educators will be empowered to honor—in practice as well as word—the explicit value that experiential education is “student rather than teacher based” (Joplin, 1995, p. 20).

**Forums for Dialog About Student-Centered Facilitation**

Forums exist for initiating and sustaining conversations aimed at increasing the use of student-centered facilitation practices. International, regional and local conferences provide ideal venues for workshops where interested teachers can engage in dialog about this topic. Further, student-centered facilitation can be a topic for staff training workshops and program debriefs. Workshop-type sessions where teachers have the opportunity to share their views regarding student-centered facilitation practices can be employed. There are many facilitators who, given the opportunity, have a lot to share with others about this topic. In so doing, we can “walk our talk” with regard to ensuring that our experiential programs honor processes through which learners [italics added] are actively engaged in all aspects of their learning experience (AEE, n.d.). In addition, the following values, tips, and techniques for incorporating more student-centered facilitation practices in experiential programs can be effective.

**Student-Centered Facilitation Techniques**

Student-centered learning is not a new idea. In general, it involves reversing traditionally teacher-centered learning and places students at the center of the learning process.
Table 1.
Seven Suggestions for Facilitating Student-Centered Experiential Education Programs

1. Recognize that changing from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning requires both awareness and effort to initiate and sustain dialog about this problem.

2. Promote student-centered learning by embracing values similar to Paulo Freire’s approach to education, where teachers and students transform learning into a collaborative process (Shor & Freire, 1987).

3. Rely less on the standard practice of talk circles and more on creative techniques to facilitate student reflection (see Greenaway, 1993; Sugerman et al., 2000).

4. When talk circles are used, experiential educators need to rethink the role of the teacher in verbal facilitation sessions, and recognize the active and influential role that the teacher has in determining what is supposed to be learned (Brown, 2002a, 2002b).

5. Let students have a role in facilitating their own experiences (Priest & Lesperance, 1994; Wilson, 1995). (See Table 2 for specific ideas.)


7. Use prescriptive and advanced generations of facilitation techniques, including metaphor (Bacon, 1983, 1987), direct frontloading, isomorphic framing, indirect frontloading (Priest & Gass, 1997), and hypnotic language (Itin, 1995), both ethically and only in experiential programs where teachers are highly trained and it is possible to get a complete and accurate needs assessment.

Emerging brain research validates what experiential educators have always known—students learn best through experiential and student-centered approaches (Understanding the Brain, 1995). How can teachers make experiential learning more student-centered? The seven suggestions that follow are values, tips, and techniques the author has gathered from personal experiences and the literature (see Table 1 for summary):

- The first suggestion reiterates the need for experiential educators to recognize that a change from teacher to student-centered learning requires both awareness and conscious effort to initiate and sustain dialog about this problem. To further clarify, most experiential educators practicing in developed countries, including the United States, England and Australia, have been socialized and educated in traditional teacher-centered venues. Thus, we are comfortable with students looking to teachers for information, answers, guidance, affirmation, and permission to speak. Wilson (1995) noted she thought she had reached a plateau in
excellence in teaching when she could “set a goal for a group, design a structured activity to ‘teach’ that lesson, and finally process it to make sure they got the point” (p. 279). This is not necessarily bad teaching, but we must acknowledge that it is not student-centered. Thus, re-socialization into student-centered values and methods involves awareness, commitment, conscious effort, practice, reflection on practice, and continuous improvement efforts.

2. A second suggestion is for experiential educators to promote student-centered learning by embracing values similar to Paulo Freire’s approach to education, where teachers and students transform learning into a collaborative process (Shor & Freire, 1987). The Freire approach is based on the belief that students can find their own authentic voice, and they create knowledge through critical encounters with reality and ideas (Shor, 1989). While an in-depth study of Freire’s and Shor’s works will certainly provide the reader with greater familiarity of Freire’s techniques than is possible within the scope of this article, a summary of their educational values, in the following section, is illuminating.

**Freire and Shor’s educational values.** Freire promotes the use of dialog in place of teacher-led discussion, because through dialog, teachers and students reflect together on what they know, and do not know, and can act critically to transform reality (Shor & Freire, 1987). Dialog implies the absence of authoritarianism and is an epistemological position—in dialog, the teacher does not own the object of study; rather, the students stimulate the teacher’s curiosity, and s/he brings enthusiasm to the students. Together, then, they can illuminate the object of learning. Dialog requires that students participate critically in their own education. This does not mean everyone has to speak, but rather students should be listening carefully to both the teacher and to each other. Students should have the right to speak or to pass, because requiring a turn at talk is coercive. Remarks should be addressed to other students, as well as to the teacher. Shor (1989) suggests that teachers encourage this behavior by breaking eye contact with students who are speaking in order to encourage students to address the group more generally. Freire’s approach fits well within experiential education, in part, because it requires students to have prior experiential contact with the object of learning before dialog. Further, the material of study, and the process of study, should be mutually developed by the students and the teachers. Freier called this “co-intentionality,” and Dewey referred to it as “co-participation” (Shor, 1989).

3. A third suggestion is for experiential educators to rely less on the standard practice of talk circles and more on creative techniques to facilitate student reflection. There are three problems with using talk circles for facilitating reflection on experience: (a) Talk circles provide a familiar teacher-centered environment that encourages the teacher to direct the learning process through questioning, validating, paraphrasing, and allocating turns at talk; (b) the emphasis on the importance of circular talk/debriefing in experiential programs has
resulted in a decrease in the importance of hands-on experience (Bacon, 1983); and (c) the use of talk, and the accompanying idea that talking about an experience is necessary for learning to occur, separates experience into “doing” and “thinking” parts which often values thinking over doing. Experiential educators can learn about alternatives to talk circles by familiarizing themselves with guides to alternative reflection activities. Greenaway (1993) described many reflection alternatives that do not rely on teacher-led talk sessions, including art, drama, dance, poetry, writing, storytelling, photography, presentations, or repeating the same activity. Sugerman et al. (2000) have prepared a wonderful guidebook to reflective learning that outlines many proven activities that empower students to take an active role in pre- and post-reflection processes.

4. A fourth suggestion for experiential educators who choose to use talk circles is to rethink the role of the teacher in verbal facilitation sessions. This will assist the teacher in recognizing the active and influential role they play in determining what is supposed to be learned (Brown, 2002a). Teachers need to be more aware of the tendency for imbalance in knowledge and power relationships that typically occurs during talk circles and consciously do the following: (a) avoid prescribing acceptable student responses; (b) have students restate their own responses when clarity is needed (or, at minimum, get agreement that the teachers’ restatement was accurate); (c) genuinely listen to students; and (d) get students to talk to, and listen to, each other by using verbal and nonverbal techniques that encourage these behaviors. For example, the teacher can redirect a student who speaks directly to her to speak to the group instead.

5. A fifth suggestion is for experiential educators to let students have a role in facilitating their own experiences. This is especially important in educational environments where teachers are not likely to acquire a complete and accurate needs assessment, which is essential for ethical application of higher generations of facilitation such as frontloading, isomorphic framing, indirect frontloading, and hypnotic language. Also, students in therapeutic programs, where facilitators tend to rely more on prescriptive (teacher-centered) methods, will likely find self-facilitation extremely beneficial. All students, regardless of the experiential program’s mission, can benefit from developing self-facilitation skills and becoming self-reliant learners. Wilson (1995) suggested empowering students by: (a) listening to them; (b) allowing them to set individual and group goals; and (c) allowing them to make choices about activities, how to respond to tasks, and when, and when not to undertake an experience (see Table 2 for a list of ideas for student-centered facilitation).

6. A sixth suggestion is for experiential educators to begin a program by assessing both teachers and students to the extent possible. A thorough needs assessment provides an important foundation on which to build a program’s goal to create a collaborative learning
Table 2. Suggestions for Students Facilitating, or Co-Facilitating, in Experiential Programs

- Have a student choose a reading to introduce a day, activity, or as a springboard for post-activity reflection.
- Instead of being the authority in the learning process, the teacher can take the role of resource person, guide, cheerleader, and coach (Warren, 1995).
- Let students decide what they need to learn (Wilson, 1995). For example, allow students to set their own individual and group goals.
- Let students co-create metaphors—tell them what an activity entails and ask, “What do you have to do in everyday life that this experience might be similar to?”
- Let students front-load their own experiences by discussing what they need to work on as individuals and as a group. At the end of the experience, have them decide how well they did. Then, let them set their goals for the next experience.
- Use real instead of contrived issues. If it can’t be real, create a larger context in which to view the event (Wilson, 1995).
- Listen, listen, listen. Don’t be too eager to share your stories, ideas, and what you think students have learned. Have students paraphrase their own statements, or at least get agreement that you have paraphrased correctly. Avoid judging students’ comments as right or wrong. Encourage students to talk to each other instead of just to you.
- Teach students how to use funneling to reflect on their experiences. Empower the team to utilize funneling to process their experiences themselves (Priest & Lesperance, 1994).

environment. Bacon (1983) noted, “It is always important to know where the students are coming from before trying to lead them somewhere else” (p. 20). Priest and Gass (1997) acknowledged that teachers should always do their homework by finding out about the group’s needs and objectives in advance. Shor (1989) pointed out that in order to operationalize a student-centered learning experience the teacher must begin by researching both self and students. In so doing, the teacher is assessing what resources and liabilities the teacher and the students bring to the learning environment. Finally, as Sugerman et al. (2000) noted, a part of good, student-centered, practice involves the teacher constantly assessing the group and his/her own reactions while an experience is ongoing.
7. A **seventh** suggestion is for experiential educators only to use prescriptive and advanced generations of facilitation techniques, including metaphor (Bacon, 1983, 1987), direct frontloading, isomorphic framing, indirect frontloading (Priest & Gass, 1997), and hypnotic language (Itin, 1995), in experiential programs when teachers are highly trained and it is possible to get a complete and accurate needs assessment. Some have questioned the ethics of these prescriptive facilitation techniques (Hunt, 1986; Priest & Gass, 1997; Wilson, 1995). It is important to emphasize the caution leveled at these generations of facilitation by Priest and Gass (1997): “Without this information [an in-depth assessment of needs as well as an understanding of what the change will mean in the client’s life if the change occurs] this approach [indirect frontloading] can be destructive and changes short lived” (p. 215). Priest and Gass further noted that the facilitator *has to really know what s/he is doing* [italics added]. Bacon (1987) also acknowledged, “the metaphor model is active and directive. As a result, its ethical and effective application requires a complete and accurate [student needs] assessment” (p. 14). Hunt cautioned that if experiential educators are going to facilitate learning experiences that involve deceptions, then they had better be both well-intentioned and apply two rules, including (a) willingness to make any deception publicly known, and (b) ask themselves whether or not they would mind if someone did this to them. Therefore, teachers should use these advanced facilitation techniques only when indicated and not as a matter of standard practice.

In summary, these seven suggestions represent a collection of specific actions experiential educators can take to ensure their facilitation practices are more student-centered. These suggestions address, in part, Brown’s call for the need for experiential educators to critically reflect on practice with a view toward exploring other avenues besides verbal reflection sessions in order to embrace our espoused values in practice. Further, the field of experiential education, as a whole, should make it a priority to think of ways student-centered facilitation techniques can be incorporated into program development and facilitator training.

**Implications for Program Development and Facilitator Training**

Most experiential programs engage in continuous improvement efforts and it makes good sense to place student-centered facilitation on programs’ agendas. For example, as a part of improvement efforts, teachers could use brainstorming and discussion to: (a) Identify ways that the program and/or teachers are currently using teacher and student-centered facilitation techniques. Ask questions like, “Does teacher or student-centered facilitation best fit with our mission?” and “What are the positive and negative effects of using teacher and student-centered facilitation?” (b) Identify where student-centered techniques fit best within the program. For example, when students are relatively mature, likely to be committed to program goals, and able to take a partnership role in their education, they are an ideal group for student-centered facilitation;
Brainstorm creative ideas for student-centered activities/methods that can be utilized. The ideas outlined in Tables 1 and 2 provide a place to start; and (d) Teachers should practice, share results, reflect, and refine facilitation approaches. Ideally, both teachers and students will grow through this process.

It is especially important to incorporate concepts from student-centered facilitation into experiential educator training programs because it is newly trained teachers who are particularly vulnerable to relying on teacher-centered approaches. To validate this point, visualize facilitators who have recently learned about the wonders of experiential education and advanced facilitation techniques, such as frontloading—they have so much enthusiasm they are ready to tell everyone about the wonderful lessons to be learned. Telling is the easiest and most comfortable technique, because it is very familiar to those socialized within Westernized educational paradigms. While many, if not most, experiential educators eventually arrive at an intuitive awareness of the importance of student-centered learning through years of practice and reflection (see authors Bell, 1993; Brown, 2002a, 2002b; Estes & Tomb, 1995; Greenaway, 1993; Knapp, 1992; Priest & Gass, 1997; Sugerman et al., 2000; Warren, 1995; Wilson, 1995), less experienced teachers are less likely to have this awareness.

Of further concern, experiential educator training often includes an introduction to advanced facilitation techniques. However, a new teacher has little context in which to understand precautions about the ethical application of these techniques. Therefore, it is especially important to include information from the present article and other related literature in training, practice, and feedback at the outset of an experiential educator’s career.

Taken together, the ideas in this article present a clear argument for establishing student-centered facilitation as an important issue in experiential education. To the extent that we, as experiential educators, are prepared to sustain dialog about student-centered facilitation, and take conscious steps to incorporate more student-centered practices into our programs, we can increase congruence between values espoused by the profession and the values we practice. Arguably, it is the profession’s very commitment to integrity that necessitates sustaining dialog about this important issue.

Conclusions

The author predicts that student-centered facilitation techniques similar to those described in the present article will become more common than talk circles in future experiential education programs. One can trace the evolution of facilitation and reflection, as it relates to the balance of teacher and student power in experiential programs, from student-centered to teacher-centered, and back to student-centered models. Brown’s (2002a) study validates what others have speculated—teachers exert a lot of power during debriefing sessions. If experiential educators wish to retain the claim that experiential education is student-
centered, and that “the learner [italics added] is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning,” (AEE, n.d.) then significant changes in our accepted facilitation practices are in order.

In response to the question, “Does student-centered facilitation really warrant so much attention when it is already an explicit value of the profession?” The author concludes with this thought: While teacher-centered experiential education has learning value, it is not nearly as beneficial as student-centered experiential education. It is clearly time for the profession to raise awareness, increase discussion, and take action in order to resolve the incongruence between what experiential education claims to value and how experience-based learning is delivered in practice.

**Author Note**

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**References**


