

Adventure Based Learning as a Curriculum Model

What is Adventure Based Learning?

- ABL is concerned with two relationships: interpersonal and intrapersonal (Priest, 1990).
 - Interpersonal relationships are related to how individuals function in a group situation, and include elements such as communication, cooperation, trust, problem-solving, leadership and conflict resolution among others (Priest, 1990).
 - Intrapersonal relationships are related to how the individual functions within himself or herself, and includes constructs such as self-concept, self-efficacy and spirituality among others (Priest, 1990).
- The premise of participation in adventure education programs is that an increased level of self-awareness is brought about by the positive change experienced through participation.
- The deliberate use of sequenced activities – particularly games, initiative activities, and problem solving activities – for the personal and social development of the participants (Cosgriff, 2000)
- Key points to successful implementation
 - Appropriate sequencing of activities
 - Facilitation of the activities
 - Processing of the activities
- The activities selected should move a group through the sequence of
 - Communication
 - Cooperation
 - Trust
 - Problem solving
 - Challenge

Purpose of the Debrief

- One of the most powerful aspects of an adventure education experience is the subsequent processing or debrief of the experience
- It is a purposeful activity that is structured to encourage individuals to plan, reflect, describe, analyze, and communicate about their experiences.
- Can occur any time before, during or after the activities
- Processing is the vehicle with which to accomplish transfer of learning to everyday life
- The debrief process is where the group reflects on what (*What?*) happened during the activity, what it meant to the group members (*So What?*), and what each group member can take from the experience that will impact their lives beyond participation in the activity (*Now What?*).

Student-centered debriefs allow students the processing power during the conversation; students construct their own learning. (Estes, 2004). During a student-centered debrief students: (a) take more control of the conversation, (b) talk freely among themselves, and (c) move away from a teacher-directed command style session. The debrief is an integral and essential aspect of Adventure Based Learning (ABL). The debrief fosters participant understanding and helps them make sense of their unique ABL experiences.

Sunday Afternoon Drive Debrief Model

This model is a variation on the experiential learning cycle for novice adventure-based learning facilitators. The purpose of this model is to provide novice facilitators with specific tools and strategies (content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge) to allow them to lead a meaningful debrief.

The facilitator/teacher begins the *drive* with ideas for the final destination based on the lesson plan, but without a set route of how to arrive there. The conversation can take many different routes to reach the final destination and the teacher follows the various rhythms, feelings, power, and aesthetics of the road (i.e., the students) as they negotiate the journey. The final destination in this model is the application (transfer) of learning to other situations in students' lives.

During the journey the *Facilitator as Co-pilot* represents the facilitator's role in the discussion. The facilitator should have some pre-planned questions for debriefing which are based on the objective(s) of the lesson or activity, the specific focus of the activity, the group dynamics of the class, and what has occurred before that may need to be covered again. These questions are designed to be used merely as a back-up plan in case the conversation needs some direction or re-direction.

Choice of Vehicle for the drive alludes to the difference between using a motorbike versus a sports car versus a mini-van. The choice can have an impact on student participation in the discussion. Initially we recommend using a sports car or small mini-van as the vehicle of choice to use small groups as it creates a more emotionally safe venue for students to engage in the initial conversation. Once a group or class becomes more comfortable working with each other and have established some emotional safety then different vehicles can be used based on the group dynamics and the objectives of the lesson.

To initiate the journey the teacher must *Start the Car* by providing the group with an initial debrief strategy. This is an interesting and engaging method of providing the group with a tool to initiate reflecting on the experience and is an alternative to asking the group "What happened?" The strategies range in complexity from a 'Quick Whip' (where everyone provides one word to describe the experience) to an Album Play List (where a small group of students create an album title and song play list that represents their experience).

Once the journey has begun the facilitator chooses a road to take based on the student responses during the initial debrief strategy. We call this part of the model *Follow the Road*. It is important for facilitators to learn to recognize which roads (comments) have the potential to lead to a powerful discussion. Having chosen a road, it is important to *normalize* the road by asking how it may relate to group members. For example during the *Start the Car* activity a few students comment that the activity was frustrating. The facilitator recognizes the potential powerful discussion on the road of frustration and asks how many of the students were frustrated during part or all of the activity. This action helps the facilitator to see how many of the group felt frustrated and thus determine if this would be a good route for the drive. Asking this question also prompts students to think of situations in the activity that proved to be frustrating and can enhance further discussion. When a group embarks on the journey down a road that has the potential for a powerful discussion, it can be taken all the way to the final destination (i.e., through to the application phase of the experiential learning cycle).

Obviously there will be times when the group encounters a road block in the conversation (e.g., students do not want to talk about frustration anymore or the responses are shallow and do not provide for further elaboration) and results in *GPS Recalculating*. If this situation arises the facilitator needs to recalculate the route for the journey either based off other student responses during the *Start the Car*, or if that is not viable then off one of their pre-prepared questions. With this strategy it is important to understand that it is better to change routes than keep following the same road if the discussion is not productive. The key is that the new route still reaches the final destination just in a different way.

Nearing Final Destination is the phase in the model that is related to the generalization of the experiential learning. Students gain a deeper understanding of the strategies related to the issue being discussed (i.e., the road being followed) that were used in the lesson that allowed the group to be successful. It can also allow students to see what strategies hindered their progress. To prepare for reaching the final destination, the facilitator steers the conversation to help students to think about the specific strategies that worked or didn't work and why. This phase of the model provides the roadmap for the final part of the journey. For example, if we continue down the road of frustration the *Nearing Final Destination* phase would guide students to consider strategies (encouragement, rethinking the problem, better communication, enhanced cooperation etc.) that allowed them to work through their frustration to complete the activity successfully. Conversely the facilitator would also guide the students to reflect on strategies or behaviors related to frustration (checking out of the activity, taking frustration out on group members, negative comments, sabotaging the group's efforts, etc.) that hindered their progress in the activity.

Final Destination - Are we there yet? This is the question that young (and sometimes not so young) children ask on car journeys and is a wonderful analogy for the concept of transfer in experiential learning. If the *Final Destination* (the application or transfer of learning to other situations in students' lives) does not occur then we are not there yet! We believe this to be the most important phase debriefing otherwise the transfer of learning has not occurred. During this phase facilitators help the students understand how to apply their learning to other areas of their lives. When teaching this model to our pre-service physical education teachers we share a personal story of how the strategies that were discussed in the *Nearing Final Destination* phase have been used in an area of our own lives. For new facilitators this story can be pre-prepared and then shaped based on the specific strategies the students discuss. In our adventure-based learning courses, the use of this strategy during the *Final Destination* has provided the impetus for very insightful and introspective conversations about transfer that have run the gamut of sports, family relationships, military service, academics, coaching, teaching, and personal relationships. Having students share how they will apply their learning to other areas of their lives during the debrief session provides the answer to the age old question on car journeys – *Are we there yet? Yes, we are there!*

Sunday Afternoon Drive Debriefing Model

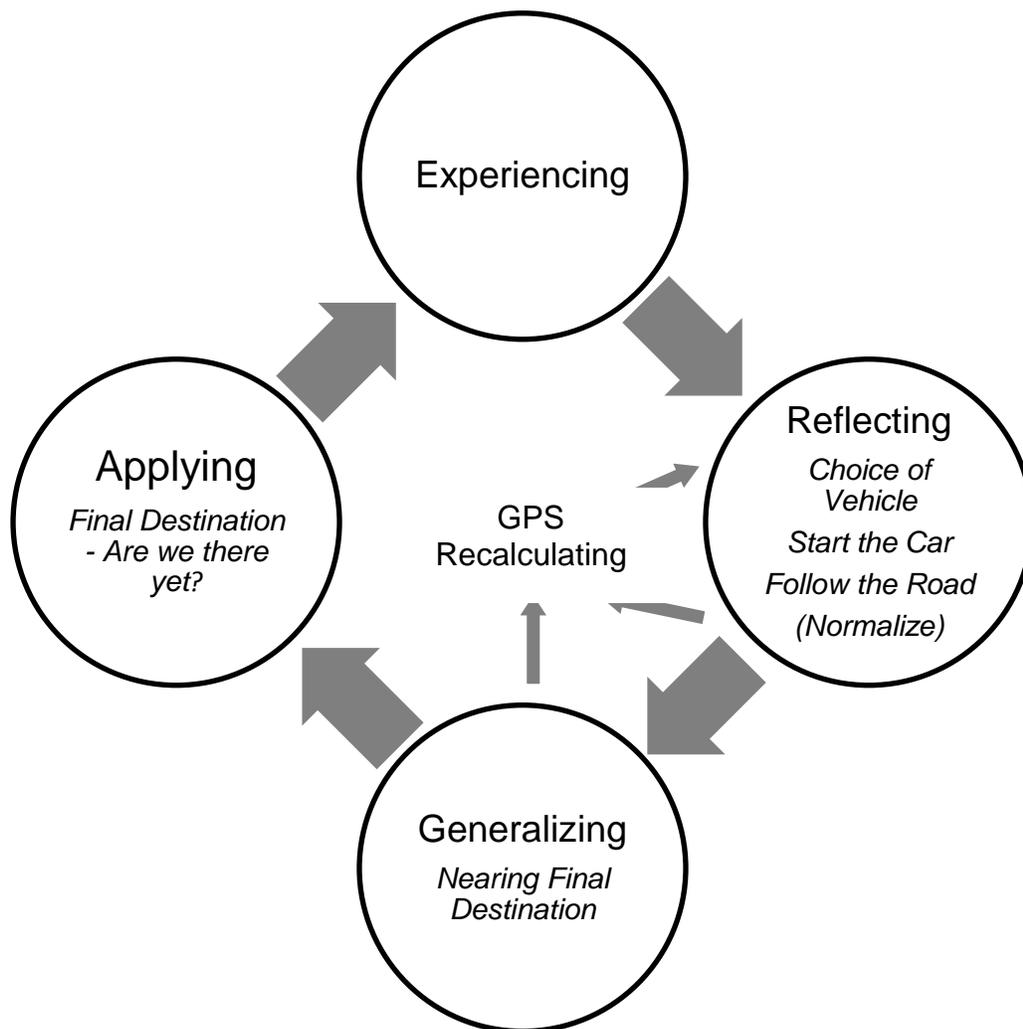


Figure 2: Sunday Afternoon Drive Debriefing Model – Sutherland, Stuhr, & Ressler

Contact Information
Paul T. Stuhr
Assistant Professor
Department of Kinesiology
Cal State University San Marcos
pstuhr@csusm.edu