Reviewing and Re-enacting Ropes Course Experiences

Benefits, Methods and Variations

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The principles and practices described in this article apply to the review of most physical activities. The reviewing techniques are described in a way that applies to the particular problems and opportunities found when using ropes course activities - artificial outdoor challenges where people climb, balance, swing and support each other while being safely belayed or closely monitored by a partner. In this article, 'ground level' = on the ground, 'low level' = about knee height, 'high level' = anything higher.

This article will help you maximise the value of physically challenging activities for participants' learning and development. You have followed all the correct safety procedures and everyone is safely back at ground level ready to review their experiences.

- Will you now sit everyone down and have a calm relaxing discussion?
- Or will you facilitate a dynamic review that creates new kinds of challenge?
- Maybe you will make time for both?

One of the most useful tools for reviewing ropes course experiences is re-enactment (action replay without cameras). With so much sport on TV, most groups readily understand the term 'action replay'. The benefits of 'action replay' as a reviewing technique depend very much on how and why you choose to use it. Some of the potential benefits are described below, followed by a list of the different ways in which re-enactments can be staged for different activities.

A problem on some ropes course activities is that it is not easy for everyone to notice what each other person is up to. Others nearby may be so wrapped up in their own world that they may not notice what others are saying or doing. Those on the ground may be getting stiff necks looking up at the antics of those above. They can easily miss key moments when they look down to give their necks a rest. Whatever the situation, it is likely that all can learn more by re-enacting the event (or key parts of the event) at ground level.

**BENEFITS**

**SEVEN BENEFITS OF ACTION REPLAY (RE-ENACTMENT)**
1. GREATER CLARITY
Re-enacting helps everyone to recall, reconstruct, synchronise and relive the event. Instead of someone saying "When I was in the middle of that rope" (with no-one being very sure which rope is being referred to) a re-enactment clarifies the situation. This is a benefit both for re-en-actors and their audience. The 're-en-actor' feels as if they are on the rope again and the audience now get a close-up 'view' of what was happening.

2. A CHANCE TO QUESTION
If anyone wants to find out more about what is (or was) happening, they can pause the re-enactment and ask. If anyone saw the event differently, they can question the first version by showing or directing their own version of the event.

3. EMOTIONAL AWARENESS
Re-enactment helps to bring back emotions and provides a second opportunity for understanding emotions and learning from them. It is also much easier to control or step outside emotions if 'walking through' the experience at ground level rather than climbing back up to the same high place - where emotions can be so strong that they take over again.

4. A SECOND CHANCE TO NOTICE
One of the values of adventure in education is the intensity of the experience, but whenever people are intensely involved, they may be much less aware of other important things that they could or should be attending to. Re-enactment increases awareness of dimensions and perspectives that were not noticed first time round.

5. BEING NOTICED
It is likely that the audience will be paying far more attention to the individual during their re-enactment than during the original event. Everyone in the group has an opportunity to be the centre of attention.

6. EXTRA POWER
The re-enactment can actually be more powerful than the original event. For example, although the fear factor may well be lower during the re-enactment, the depth and quality of communication with others and the degree of mutual understanding may be much higher 'second time round'.

with or without a camera?

**Action Replay vs. Video**
ACTION REPLAY has many advantages over video work:
- it is more fun
- it keeps involvement and energy high
- it is more challenging
- it is more convenient and saves time
- it is cheaper
- you can do it almost anywhere
- you need no equipment (although some 'props' might be useful)
- it is an exercise in memory, creativity, and teamwork
- it can provide everyone with a chance of leadership (as director)

[Video has many benefits too, but this article is not about video work.]
the actor to 'play down' or 'play up' different aspects of the experience.

7. BALANCE
It is the quality of the whole process (activity + review) that produces experiential learning. "Quality action and quality reflection on that action are of fundamental equal importance" writes Colin Mortlock in *Beyond Adventure* (2001:119). A re-enactment helps to create a balance between action and reflection within the review process itself. The habit of re-enactment also increases the chances that participants will become more aware and reflective during future activities. In this way, activity includes reflection, and reflection includes activity. This is the goal of most active reviewing.

**METHODS**

**EIGHT WAYS OF STAGING ACTION REPLAYS (RE-ENACTMENTS)**

Here are some ways in which different kinds of activities can be staged for re-enactment.

1. **Vertical journeys** (such as climbing or abseiling). These can be re-enacted at ground level by turning vertical movement into horizontal movement. The Monty Python team famously (and even humorously!) did this when crawling along a pavement in full climbing gear - pretending they were doing a vertical climb. This method suits 'The Wall' and 'Jacob's Ladder'. For 'Jacob's Ladder' it is best to lie an identical ladder on the ground.

2. **High level journeys** (such as crossing a rope bridge). Ask those involved to re-enact the journey at ground level directly below the bridge. If the bridge crosses dangerous ground or water, then recreate the bridge in a safer location by laying a rope of a similar length on flat ground.

3. **Individual balancing** on a high pole (such as 'Leap of Faith'). Use a short log with a similar diameter. Alternatively, a chair provides a suitable height but is less realistic. If the site has a practice pole (less than half a metre high) you have the perfect short pole on which a re-enactment can be staged. Take proper safety precautions if the re-enactment could include jumping off.

4. **Group balancing** on a high platform (such as 'High All Aboard'). Re-enactment at ground level can actually be more dangerous - because of the danger of falling backwards onto the ground (instead of dangling on a safety rope). So the re-enactment platform should not be raised above the ground, the ground should be soft and clear of obstacles, and all involved should be supported by at least one 'spotter' each. (A 'spotter' is a partner who is fully briefed on how to safely catch or prevent a fall.)

5. **Launching off** (such as 'Big Swing' or 'Zip Wire'). A low level rope swing (such as used for 'Low All Aboard') provides a perfect venue for re-enacting launches at a higher level.
6. **Low level activities** (such as 'Mohawk Walk' or 'Criss-cross'). You can either re-enact the event at ground level right beside the original location, or you can mark out the journey on the ground (in a different place) using ropes of a similar length.

7. **Ground level activities** (such as 'Spiders Web'). Make a line on the ground marking the position of the web. The re-enactment is the same as the original event minus the actual web. A smooth-topped, splinter-free, round-edged table is a useful addition for re-enacting any moments that involved lifting. In the re-enactment, the person passing through the web is slid across the table. This reduces the physical effort for carriers (during the re-enactment) and allows the action to be easily paused at any point - even in the middle of a carry.

8. **Low level traverse** (or 'Low All Aboard'). Low level activities are much easier to stop and start, so it less necessary to complete the activity before reviewing it. Five minutes into the activity, ask the group to stop and remember where they are. Their extra challenge is to repeat the first five minutes word-for-word and move-for-move before they can continue and complete the activity. This is more 'real' than other re-enactments because there is less 'pretending' involved. You can still choose to pause the action if there are moments that you (or they) want to explore further.

9. **Group balance** ('Whale Watch' or 'Giant Seesaw'). Wedge the seesaw with suitably strong wedges so that it will not move during the re-enactment. This allows people to pay attention to each other without being distracted by the seesaw seesawing.

**VARIATIONS**

**MINIATURE REPLAYS (RE-ENACTMENTS)**

For miniature re-enactments you will need a scale model of the ropes course. Perhaps the ropes course designer made one for you at the design stage? It is also handy to have suitably sized soft toys that are easily hooked (or placed) onto different parts of the miniature ropes course. The group sits around the model in a circle - making it easy for group discussion to develop whenever appropriate. Miniaturisation lends itself to a different kind of review in which the facilitator asks people to place their personal icon (or puppet) at the point on the model where they felt most comfortable, least comfortable, most wrapped up in their own world, most aware of others, most wanting help, most impressed with self, most disappointed in self, when thinking 'why am I doing this?', when wanting to use a camera, when wanting (or not wanting) their own photo taken, when making connections with something else, etc. Miniature re-enactment is a good bad weather alternative - although action replay can always happen indoors or in a shelter if enough space is available. The use of icons, toys, dolls or puppets to represent self also adds interest and results in a different kind of reflection in which it is easier to switch between 'being me' and
'seeing me'.

**WALK-THROUGH COMMENTARY WITH PARTNER**

This is reliving rather than re-enactment. Participants retrace their steps at ground level with a partner. While walking through their journey (directly underneath the high level activities if it is safe to do so) the re-en-actor provides a commentary on what was going through their mind at the time. Alternatively they can provide a commentary in the third person as if commenting on their own performance from an external point of view ("This is the bit Roger said he was looking forward to, but you wouldn't think so now from the look on his face. He can't quite reach ... He's looking around for some advice. Or is he thinking of cheating?") The partner may simply listen or may have been primed by the facilitator to ask specific questions. At the end of the walk-through, the listening partner can be asked to help the commentator reduce their story into a few key words, or to help them summarise their story in three sentences without making any direct reference to the physical environment.

**Why summarise in these ways?**

1. **Reduction helps to bring out essences** - but (unfortunately) can also bring out superficial clichés.
2. **Context-free summaries assist the transfer of learning** because any learning within the story is more readily generalised.
3. **Less is more**: succinct summaries make sharing within the group more efficient and more interesting.

Naturally you will want partners to switch roles at some point so that both can benefit from each role. Paired work followed by group sharing can result in the best of both worlds - time for individuals to reflect in depth on their own experiences, time for pairs to get to know each other better, and an opportunity for the group to learn about (and even learn from) each other's stories.

**MORE ABOUT ACTION REPLAY**

Simply doing a re-enactment can be of value in itself, but in most situations it pays to pause the action at critical points and bring out more sides of the story - whether investigating success or failure or something of interest. Once a group is used to replays, it is a small step to invite them to take the replay into the future and explore future possibilities.

You will find more information and ideas about Action Replay in other sections of the Active Reviewing Guide:

- [Action Replay and Variations](#) (part of 'Stories in Learning')
- [Visible Reflection Techniques](#) (article)
- [Active Reviewing](#) (article)

Also (on Thiagi's website) see [The Game after the Game](#) in Thiagi's Play for Performance September 2001.

**BEYOND RE-ENACTMENT**
Re-enactment is a useful and versatile tool for reviewing ropes course experiences, but you will also want to mix in other reviewing methods - depending on the issues arising or on the goals that groups or individuals are trying to achieve. You can find many more methods in the Guide to Active Reviewing at http://reviewing.co.uk Using ropes as reviewing aids is particularly recommended ...

**REVIEWING WITHropes**

Ropes are not only good for swings, bridges and safety systems. They are also a highly versatile reviewing tool. When reviewing ropes course activities it makes even more sense to make use of ropes in reviews. For ideas about how you can use ropes for reviewing (all kinds of activities) refer to my earlier article Reviewing with Ropes.

**MORE WAYS OF REVIEWING ROPES COURSE ACTIVITIES**

What are your favourite methods? I will be pleased to add your ideas to the end of this article - with full credit to you (if that's what you would like to see).

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