

# Pedagogical Rationale

## A Request for Team-Based Ropes Courses in Professional Communication

As a new instructor at WWU I bring a wide array of teaching strategies to my courses. Thanks to my training as an Adult Educator through my graduate work in Woodring's Continuing and College Education Program, I have come to understand the nuances of a variety of pedagogical approaches and work to incorporate a diverse compilation of opportunities for students to engage with course content. In my Professional Communication course (COMM 318) we spend a great deal of time and energy focusing on teamwork in the context of professional success. One valuable way I have chosen to engage students this quarter is by having them attend a ropes course at WWU's beautiful Lakewood Facility. Though not financially sustainable to offer without a minimal course fee for students, I feel the ropes course offers a unique and otherwise unobtainable opportunity for learning that benefits them beyond the duration of the course. The chance to practice the skills we are covering in our texts, to put to practice the strategies offered by experts, and to galvanize their sense of self with memories of their efforts, abilities and successes under pressure is a great gift. The cost--approximately \$18 per person--seems minimal for the lasting impact of this approach to teaching teamwork.

For brevity's sake I am including a list of studies and key points which influence my choice to pursue the ropes course for my students and requesting the added fee in bullet form:

- Some educators suggest that "in the fast- food-like stream of contemporary education, the incursion of portable technological devices [...] can threaten the very silence and space needed for contemplation" (p159), which aligns well with my attention to reflection in the design of my course. Though technology is a primary facilitator in the transfer of learning for students I believe that removing them from the stimulation of those mediums and temporarily placing them in a context which requires them to practice and reflect on course concepts in a dissimilar yet corresponding manner can lead to deeper insights, improved learning outcomes, and improved attitudes about team work.
  - Beard, C., & J. P. Wilson. (2006) *Experiential learning: a best practice handbook for educators and trainers*. Kogan Page: London.
- A 2000 study on the effects of ropes courses on perceived team performance among intact teams found a significant impact on participant perceptions between the control and experimental groups using Gilbert's (1996) Team Performance Assessment. Both groups assessed perceptions at multiple intervals and the experimental group reported a much higher score than the control group.
  - Bannon, M. (2000). The effects of the outdoor experiential ropes course on perceived team performance. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. 61(03A), 852.
- A 2003 study of graduate students who participated in a challenge course illustrated the contribution of the course to overall learning enhancement.
  - Bartley, S. J. Kupritz, V. W. & Powers, M. (2003, Spring) *Effectiveness of a low ropes course experience to promote learning in an HRD graduate course*.
- I myself participated in a ropes course during my graduate studies, in a unit on experiential education, and the profound impacts on my willingness to welcome team work to my daily practice are still far-reaching three years later.

- In Ukens' text *What Smart Trainers Know* (2001), experiential learning is discussed as a forum for "holistic understanding by forming an integrated big picture, rather than a fragmented one," (359). I appreciate the value offered by the 'big picture' of the ropes course: the opportunity to engage in active problem-solving, resolve team differences, set realistic goals and utilize limited resources in achieving them. "The use of experiential learning activities has many advantages, especially in regard to teams... This ability to practice gives team members a chance to work on their performance without worrying about actual results. They can experiment, learn from the experience, make corrections, and try again," (360).
  - Ukens, L. L. (2001) *What smart trainers know: the secrets of success from the world's foremost experts*. Wiley: San Francisco.
  
- Lastly is the introductory claim from the text that my Professional Communication students are using, *Communicating at Work*, speaking to the ever-increasing demand for effective and willing team-oriented employees: "Working with others is a vital part of virtually every job... Given the prevalence of teams, no matter how talented you are, being a solo player is not an option in today's business world," (184). This information is presented to students as a cornerstone of their learning from this course, and it drives the content in a way as to suggest that the characteristics of adept team-players are among the most desirable in today's market.
  - Adler, R. B., J. Elmhurst & K. Lucas. (2013). *Communicating at work: strategies for success in business and the professions*. McGraw-Hill: New York.

The ropes course I am proposing simply offers a high-resolution way to engage students in learning, practicing, and reflecting on the core course concepts we cover in Professional Communication. The unforgettable nature of experiential learning in a context such as outdoors, perched 30" above the ground, also bodes well for retention of concepts and fosters transfer of learning in a way that classroom facilitation alone simply can not.

If you are further interested in the research on the efficacy of challenge courses in a variety of participant contexts, and with a number of research questions considered, I recommend this comprehensive annotated bibliography from a Professor at North Carolina State University: [http://acct.affiniscape.com/associations/5266/files/attarian\\_bibliography.pdf](http://acct.affiniscape.com/associations/5266/files/attarian_bibliography.pdf). If I can offer any further details into my course or the work students are doing I would be happy to do so.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Heather Davidson, M. Ed.