

Whose Choice Is It? Contemplating Challenge-by-Choice and Diverse-abilities

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This article examines the ethical dilemmas experienced by the authors that arose during a challenge course event with a child with special needs. Through written narrative accounts of this event, the authors offer their perspectives of questions and considerations surrounding the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy when working with children with special needs. Core values of Challenge-by-Choice are discussed, as well as basic philosophical tenets surrounding aspects of choice. Lessons learned from the personal experience are offered in the hopes of sparking discussions among other practitioners, and preventing similar situations from arising elsewhere.

"The way a child learns how to make decisions is: by making decisions"

(Kohn, 1998, p. 253).

Does the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy on challenge courses hold up when considering those with special needs? At first glance, when applying our ethical and societal beliefs in inclusive experiences for all, we answer with an emphatic, "Yes. Why, of course!" Wait a minute, though. Let's sift this Challenge-by-Choice philosophy through the sieve one more time.

There are obvious legal mandates that guide our practice and form our ideals of inclusive challenge course experiences for school children. Section 504 of Public Law 93-112, passed in 1973, provides for access

to regular education curricula, with adaptations for children with disabilities. Public Law 101-476, passed in 1990 and referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reemphasized a free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities, and specific rights for children and parents. Public Law 101-336, known as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not specifically pertain to education, but emphasizes rights and provisions for persons with disabilities in places of business (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Since some challenge course programs lease or utilize facilities from businesses, such as camp properties, the ADA often intersects with that of the IDEA legislation.

Making provisions for all children to participate in challenge course events, however, runs into a brick wall when considering the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy practiced by many, if not most, challenge course programs in the U.S. There are inconsistencies in the foundational bricks of the Challenge-by-Choice ideology which appear to prevent the philosophy from being adhered to in all situations. As Alfie Kohn (1998) stated, "the question of choice is both more complex and more compelling than many educators seem to assume" (p. 251). Through the sharing of our personal narratives, this paper offers an examination of the ethical dilemmas that emerged during a challenge course event with a child with special needs.

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Core Values of Challenge-by-Choice

The Challenge-by-Choice philosophy was first coined and advocated by Project Adventure, established in 1971 as one of the first adventure education school programs in the United States (Rohnke, 1989). In the early days of Project Adventure and challenge courses, at times, coercion and pressure was used to encourage reluctant participants to try activities, or to surpass their self-determined limits. Project Adventure recognized the emotional harm and legal liability issues surrounding coercion, and constructed the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy. The value in authentic, intrinsic, and personal challenge was realized as integral to a positive challenge course experience and self-development. Additionally, it was realized that success must be defined by the participant, not by course designers or facilitators (Rohnke).

The Challenge-by-Choice philosophy appears to be based on three general core values. One of the core values of the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy advocates that participants should be able to set their own goals on particular challenge elements. Success is not in completing the entire element as it was built, but in reaching one's own predetermined goal.

A second value of the philosophy allows a participant to choose how much of an element they will experience. They must be able to determine when the ending point of their journey on an element arrives. Rohnke (1989) refers to this as offering the participant the "opportunity to back off when performance pressures or self-doubt become too strong" (p. 14).

The third core value of the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy supports the idea of making informed choices. A person with little-to-no challenge course experience, or knowledge about course construction, cannot make an informed choice regarding their participation without some information.

Aspects of Choice and Ethical Dilemmas on Challenge Courses

According to Donagan (1987), choice is philosophically based on two presuppositions. One of these is the belief that our choices will result in an action or bring about an event. The example Donagan offered is that, for those of us without special physical or intellectual needs, we choose to raise our arm, and our arm is raised. However, when considering persons with diverse abilities, this presupposition of choice does not hold. A person with special needs may, indeed, decide to raise their arm, but the arm may not move. In that case, what is chosen does not occur.

The other presupposition of choice, according to Donagan (1987), is that we each control our own bodily

and mental functions. There is power over physical and mental states, and power over bringing about changes in them. Again, when considering those with special needs, this aspect of choice does not hold. A person with special needs may not be able to choose to raise their arm any more than they could "choose that the sun will rise tomorrow" (p. 91).

If basic philosophical tenets of choice do not apply to those with special needs, then can those persons truly be offered the full realm of the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy? How does a facilitator know that the decision has been an informed one? We demand that participants on challenge courses have a right to know the risks, real and perceived, of which they are about to take part. Do we say, then, that those who cannot fully understand and realize these risks don't need to know them?

Peterson and Stumbo (1999) advocated that a mind shift is needed from focusing on what a person can't do or doesn't understand, to what a person can do and does understand. Further guidance for these questions comes from a set of ethical principles constructed by the Therapeutic Adventure Professional Group (TAPG) of the Association of Experiential Education. The principles state that participants have a right to self-determination, and a right to make decisions. Participants should be helped in understanding the consequences, rights, risks, and responsibilities associated with their decisions (Gass, 1993). Still, the questions linger. How can we know how much is being understood? Is the understanding enough to make a decision to participate or not to participate? Furthermore, are there special cases when the challenge course facilitator, the teacher, or the parent can make the decision for the participant?

Ethically, wisely, and prudently, how can a facilitator allow an individual with a seemingly limited ability to make informed choices to participate on a challenge course at all? On the other hand, ethically and inclusively, how can a facilitator not allow all persons to participate?

It was this very dilemma, experienced directly or indirectly by the authors, that spawned the issues raised in this article. This article stemmed from a group of conversations engaged in by us (the authors) during the week following an ethical situation at our challenge course.

The purpose of this article is to share our story, and our thoughts, regarding issues of Challenge-by-Choice for people with special abilities, especially children. It is our intention that our dilemma will spawn dialogue with and between others whom may have had or could possibly have similar experiences.

The Story, as told by Julie

Two weeks out of the school year, students of all ages from contained special education classrooms in our school district attend our outdoor education program.

The students have various and multiple physical and intellectual special needs. Some of the children are in wheelchairs. It was the experience of one such little boy in a wheelchair, whom we'll call Rick (pseudo-name), which led to a series of alterations in thought over the time period of a few weeks in the spring of 2000.

Students with special needs who attend our program during these two weeks are offered the opportunity to participate in one or two high challenge course elements. They attend our program surrounded by parents, teachers, and classmates who already have created caring and trusting relationships with the children. In our experience, the high challenge course elements, which are often adapted in some way, provide tremendous self-confidence and self-esteem boosting for the children, as well as physical challenges.

Although the challenge course at our facility has operated for several years with children with diverse abilities, still, a situation arose which was unforeseen. Had it been foreseen, it could have been approached differently. We should have practiced what we already knew, that "discourse should be facilitated between various professionals, family, and other significant persons in the...impaired person's life" (von Tetzchner & Jensen, 1999, p. 461). Perhaps, our story of the lack of foresight and adherence to our principles can benefit others who may experience similar circumstances.

The Day of the Challenge

Rick was born with cerebral palsy. He had lived his entire twelve years of life in a wheelchair. He had limited range of motion of his arms and legs. He could grasp small objects, like a stick, with only his left hand. He could not feed himself. He had a lack of muscle rigidity. At his mother's request, we gave Rick constant reminders to hold his head up. Otherwise, sitting in his chair, his head nearly rested on his knees. He had limited communication skills. Although he did not talk, Rick smiled often. Sometimes he blinked, used eye movements, or moved his head to communicate. For the most part, Rick was totally dependent on the care of others. He weighed around one hundred pounds.

The day that Rick's group was scheduled to participate on the challenge course, based on what had been observed of his and the other students' abilities in that group, I had made the decision as to what challenge course elements each student would be offered the opportunity to attempt. One of the elements is a sixty-foot wooden climbing tower. The wall is slanted, and has large odd-shaped wooden blocks attached to it for climbing. It was this climbing tower that came to be the physical catalyst of our ethical dilemma.

In order to aid climbers who do not have the strength or the coordination to physically lift and pull

their body upward, a counter-weight system had been devised for the climbing tower. This system was designed for climbers who can reach, or stand, or have enough upper body strength to grasp the wooden blocks and pull themselves upward. Since Rick was not able to do any of these physical movements, in my judgement, for Rick to participate on the wall, basically, he would have to be hoisted up it, twirling around on the rope, with his body bumping over the wooden blocks. To me, the climbing tower would be a cruel and uncompassionate activity to put Rick through. There were other more appropriate elements for Rick to take part in that would be safer and more rewarding for him. I was applying the guidelines for the "Appropriate Use of Risk" stated by the TAPG of the Association of Experiential Education (Gass, 1993). I thought I was being caring, and prudent, in my decision.

This decision was made for Rick, without his input, or the input of his mother or teachers, before he ever arrived at the challenge course that day. He was taken to other areas of the challenge course where he participated in some elements where he could be lifted through mid-air, without being in contact with walls or poles.

Arrival at the Tower

At the end of the challenge course morning, I radioed from the climbing tower to the facilitators at the other elements to announce that all climbers at the tower were finished, and that the equipment was about to be taken down. The head coordinator of the program, unaware of any previous decisions, radioed back to request that the equipment not be taken down because Rick was enroute to climb the tower. As I raised the radio to explain that the decision had already been made for Rick not to climb the tower, I stopped in mid-movement. There was Rick, coming down the trail, being pushed by his mother, and accompanied by an entourage of visiting teachers, students, and the head coordinator coming along to cheer him on.

It was soon discovered that Rick's instructor had spent the morning trying to get Rick pumped up about climbing the wall. This instructor had known that Rick was "assigned" to attempt elements other than the tower, but did not comprehend that the tower had been specifically excluded from being attempted. To convince Rick to try the tower, the instructor had told Rick he would climb the wall right next to him and help him. Rick's mother (who had not seen a challenge course before) had agreed he could climb the wall, but only if the instructor climbed with him.

Caught in between a wall and a hard place, I suddenly felt placed in the position of possibly allowing endangerment to a child. The other instructors, parents, and teachers who were present did not express any anx-

iety or apprehension. They arrived as a parade celebrating the efforts of their favorite athlete. As they marveled over the tall expanse of the wall, the excitement and anticipation in the air was high.

Perhaps I was being overly cautious. On the other hand, the instructor who had made the new decision for Rick to climb the tower had less than a year's experience with our program. The parents, teachers, and other students had no challenge course experience. I froze, feeling uncertainty, cautiousness, and a bit of anger, pondering if it was truly Rick's safety that was at the core of the concern now, or if it was that a previous decision had been overridden. Was it a battle over whose choice it was to make—mine, the instructor's, the coordinator's, the parent's, or... Rick's?

The Ascent

Rick was already suited in the helmet and climbing harness he would need on the tower. The smiles on everyone's faces were genuine as everyone marveled over the sight of the tall wall and imagined Rick ascending it. I couldn't see if Rick was smiling. Rick couldn't even see the wall. His face was buried in his knees.

For me to stop Rick's potential ascent of the tower at this point would appear to be insensitive to inclusion for all students. At the same time, I viewed the others as insensitive. It was my sensitivity and compassion for Rick as a human being with feelings and emotions that caused my desire to stop this from happening. It was also sensitivity and compassion for Rick that drove the others to want him to climb. All parties had Rick's well-being at the core of their actions.

Finding no immediate or tactful, professional way to reverse what was about to happen to Rick, short of laying across the equipment and refusing to move, I reluctantly assisted in dragging Rick's body over the wooden blocks, as his cabin instructor, also on belay, pushed Rick from below. The counter-weight system, since Rick could not do anything to help himself climb, required that three strong adults on the ground manually pull a rope downward as Rick's body rose upward.

As Rick was pulled upward, I kept wondering if anyone had actually asked Rick if he wanted to climb the wall, or if the instructor and his mother had made the decision for him. If so, how was that any worse or better than myself having pre-made the decision for him not to climb? More so, why hadn't I, who should know better, taken the initiative to ask Rick? Wasn't that a priority, to ensure the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy on our course was always followed? As I continued to help Rick bump up the wall, I realized the full brunt of the failure of our program's and my own responsibility to him.

Reaching the Peak

As Rick and the instructor neared the halfway point on the wall, which was the goal set beforehand by people other than Rick, spectators on the ground roared and cheered. They lavished praise and thank-you's on all of the staff regarding the great opportunity we had allowed Rick to have that day. As we began to slowly lower the climbers, Rick flashed an unmistakable, ear-to-ear smile that could have illuminated the deepest crack in the darkest cave.

Shared Thoughts, as told by Kirk

I had the opportunity to discuss the experience of Rick at the climbing wall after it had occurred with Julie. The story was told in great detail and with a teacher's passion. I could tell there were sincere concerns and a bit of doubt. Did we do the right thing? Everyone was living in the moment. The wall was set up, the necessary equipment was available and the adults wanted Rick to climb. It was not the most comfortable experience for Rick; although he never told them, visual observations (the helmet falling back, the tugging in the seat harness to move him upward, and the horizontal position of his body while moving up the vertical wall) would lead us to believe this. Neither was it a comfortable experience for Julie, the worry about what was right, the thought of a forced challenge, and the visual discomfort of Rick. During our conversations of the experience, we had many discussions about what is appropriate for people with special needs. What is universal and what is accessible? How do we know what is choice for the individual and what is a facilitator's lowered expectation of high element challenge course experiences for people with special needs?

The Association of Challenge Course Technology (ACCT) defines a "universal" challenge course as having three main characteristics. First, a universal course is one that has multiple choices or levels of challenge for participants. Second, each option provides an opportunity for meaningful participation within the challenge course experience. Finally, any participant can select any of the available options and realize some degree of physical, intellectual, emotional, or social challenge. An important factor in universal design is the absence of obvious indicators that elements have been specifically altered for use by persons with special needs (Rogers, 1999).

ACCT has defined "accessible" according to legal implications outlined in state and federal legislative acts, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Accessible design standards for items such as restrooms or printed literature may be adopted by some challenge course designers or builders. However, the challenge course industry itself does not at this time have legal standards for accessible design (Rogers, 1999). Rogers

stressed that, "The lack of specific standards does not, however, exempt challenge course-based programs from complying with the laws" (p. 4).

Sugarman (1993) advocated that universal design means designing buildings and products that can be used by everyone. Sugarman also stressed, "in terms of ropes courses, this means designing elements that the entire group can use instead of having some elements designed exclusively for people with disabilities and some exclusively for non-disabled people" (p. 29). Using the definitions of universal by ACCT (Rogers, 1999) and Sugarman, a facilitator can put thought into their philosophical approach of providing a challenge course experience for people with special needs. For courses that were not universally designed, a facilitator can use only the activities that each member of that group can attempt.

During our discussions, we have worked through details of the facilitator's responsibility, a universal perspective, and participant choice. We find the importance of a facilitator's responsibility explored in the writings of John Dewey (1938/1997) in his book, *Experience and Education*. Dewey stated, "The greater the maturity of experience which should belong to the adult as educator puts him in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way in which the one having the less mature experience cannot do" (p.38). Through the writings of Dewey, the educator, or in this case the facilitator, is ultimately responsible for providing the participants with activities or elements that are appropriate to their needs and diverse abilities.

One of the guiding principles set forth by ACCT states that access to a challenge course should be provided in such a way as to provide options for meaningful challenges within the program's context (Rogers, 1999). As the facilitator, we should choose the activities or elements in which our equipment can be utilized in the most efficient means and our activity choice should best fit the needs of our participants. Secondly, the universal perspective should be something we practice each time we work with a group of people. We should consider each person's attributes as they have been shown or understood by the facilitator and the group to be diverse abilities and not issues that restrict or limit individuals. A universal perspective will provide an inclusive environment within the group through the duration of the challenge course experience. Third, an individual's choice should always be made by that individual. In Rick's case, Julie had made the decision that Rick would not attempt the climbing wall. Later, according to Julie's perception, decisions were made for him to climb by the other adults around him.

In *Cowstails and Cobras II*, Karl Rohnke (1989) stated that the Challenge-by-Choice concept "offers a partic-

ipant respect for individual ideas and choices" (p. 14). As the facilitator, it is our responsibility to give the individual the opportunity to make their own choices. It is also our responsibility to create the atmosphere of support and respect within our group for all individuals both before and after their choices have been made.

Lessons Learned

From our experience, and wisdom gained from it, we offer a few key points to consider that would help a challenge course facilitator open the possibility of choice for individuals like Rick.

1. Learn the participant's communication cues and techniques. Find out if they are simple hand gestures or verbal words or sounds. During the first stages of introduction, ask yes or no knowledge-based questions. Examples might include: "Are you comfortable?", "Are you having fun?", and "If we place the harness in this position, does it support your body weight differently?" Remember that the individual will be leaving the ground on a high activity. Therefore, the communication cues should be something that can be understood from the ground belay, or communicated by someone who can climb or be positioned near the participant.
2. Explain the activity and discuss possible situations with the participant. Move away from the group to do this, if necessary. In Rick's case, his mother, or Rick's teacher, could have been of tremendous assistance to learn his communication skills and help to describe or discuss the activity with him.
3. Have the participant observe the activity while it is in use with other group members to provide direct observation of how the element works.

Additionally, I would like to suggest a few more technical hints for scenarios similar to Rick's. These suggestions can create an opportunity for participant independence where an assistant climber may not be needed. As the facilitator, creating an atmosphere that provides individual independence should be the goal.

- In Rick's case, a wall that had a slanted pitch was used. The placement of the rope overhead and the movement of the weights continuously pulled Rick's body into the wall. In some cases, a vertical wall would be more appropriate.

- If possible, handholds that are cut into the face of the wall may be more easily accessed than blocks that protrude from it.

- Sometimes a full-body harness can be very helpful. If the full-body harness has front and back clip-in points, place the weighted connection to the front waist point and the belay clip-in to the back belay point. Make

sure the harness is used properly under the manufacturer's guidelines. Then, use the ropes to help maintain an upward seated position for the participant, if possible.

Ending Remarks

Reflective Practice

During the weeks following Rick's experience at the course, we found ourselves engaging in reflective conversations regarding what had happened, the emotions that were involved, and how the conflicts in the situation could have been prevented. These conversations, in turn, carried over to conversations with the program staff involved in Rick's experience, so that the incident could become a learning experience for us all. Through our conversations and planning for subsequent weeks for children with special needs, we (now referring to all the staff members involved in Rick's experience) arrived at new places in our thinking. We made changes in our practice, and made agreements regarding our communication.

Universal Perspective

We have added dimension to our understanding of the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy. We have realized that the Challenge-by-Choice philosophy becomes even stronger, perhaps, when one approaches challenge course facilitation with a universal perspective. Yesseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow (1992) support the development of a universal perspective in their statement that "beliefs that disabilities cause impairments and limitations must be replaced by views that disabilities cause

challenges that many people overcome" (p. 64).

It is not uncommon to exclude persons, especially children, with special needs from the goal-setting or choice-making process, which reifies dependence on others. Goal setting for persons with diverse abilities (as with all persons) is "invaluable in any growth experience and enhances the participants' ability to set realistic goals for themselves—perhaps leading to a sense of control and responsibility in their lives" (Havens, 1992, p. 68).

Open and Continual Conversations

Additionally, we have learned the important lesson that dialogue should be fostered between the participant, facilitators, family members, and any other significant persons in the individual's experience. Of utmost importance, "communication with severely and profoundly communication impaired people, even if their communication means are limited, must also be part of this process" (von Tetzchner & Jensen, 1999, p. 461). Pre-reflective (before the challenge experience) and post-reflective (after the experience) conversations are integral to understanding and making sense of challenge experiences. Dialogue should also take place continually throughout challenge experiences, as changes in thinking and action occur.

This is not the conclusion! Through our experience with Rick and the suggestions provided, we hope that our reflection and thoughts will help in the facilitation of diverse challenge course groups. Hopefully, our conversation will, in turn, spark conversations of others to prevent similar dilemmas from arising in the first place.

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