Team-Building Experiences to Promote Critical Thinking
Community Outreach and Health Promotion (HWP 310)
Spring 2013 Report – by Ameena Batada, HWP Department

Background
During the Spring 2013 semester, I have elected to focus on Inquiry-ARC and critical
thinking skills as part of my two sections of a Community Outreach and Health
Promotion (HWP 310) course. The Inquiry ARC program supported a two-day team-
building experience for the students, which was offered by the UNC Asheville Campus
Recreation Program.

Team-Building Experiences
I discussed with Leah McDowell in Campus Recreation the objectives of the course and
critical thinking learning outcomes and she and her team designed a series of pair and
group activities to encourage inquiry, application, reflection, and communication and to
connect and prepare students for a community project they will carry out in the course.

The two team-building days took place
during the second week of classes. On the
first day, students became familiar with each
other and one other’s names through an
introductory game. Students then broke into
two groups and were introduced to a
challenge entitled, “Hot Chocolate River.”
The object of the challenge was to get all
members of the group across the river by
only stepping on foam “marshmallows”. Each group, however, was divided into pairs
with one partner blindfolded and the other
guiding her/him. One additional
requirement was that every marshmallow
had to have at least one person’s foot on it at
all times or it would “float away” (taken out
of play), making it harder for the team to
cross.

Hot Chocolate River Challenge
The day ended with a trust walk, in which students led their blindfolded partners around the building with either only verbal or only touch instructions.

The second day started with another game to increase familiarity and name recall. The remainder of the session was spent on one activity in which some students took on the role of community partner or health professional and some students took on the role of themselves, undertaking a group project. The community partner/health professional group was asked by the facilitators to take a seemingly random assemblage of items (including such items as Lego blocks, bungee cord, a tarp, and others) and create their “vision.” Then, they were told that they would have to explain their vision to the group playing the students and that they could only do this by sending one person out at a time to meet with one person in the other group (which was in a separate room). The “student” group had all of the same items but didn’t know what the vision looked like. They could only send one person out at a time to hear what the community/professional group member explained and then s/he would go back to communicate the information and help re-create the vision.
Student Reflections

Students received an assignment to complete based on the team-building experience. The assignment outlined the requirements for a 3-4 page paper, in which students were to use the I-ARC framework to discuss what they took away from the team-building experiences. This assignment served as a way for students to apply the I-ARC framework and it provided an opportunity for students to engage in deeper analysis of their experience than if they were asked to simply reflect. The assignment included the following prompt related to I-ARC:

i. **Inquiry** – Asking the best questions – What questions came up as you went through the team building activities? These may be questions about how to accomplish the activities themselves or questions about your personal abilities or styles.

ii. **Application** – Using and adapting appropriate knowledge and ideas – What did you learn and then apply during the activities? How can you apply what you learned from the team building and personality test experiences to your work in community health promotion in this class and/or beyond?

iii. **Reflection** – Deepening and creatively expanding your responses, interpretations and understandings – How did you reflect on what was happening during the activities to come up with solutions or ways to accomplish tasks?

iv. **Communication** – Sharing your ideas clearly and effectively with a wide range of audiences – How did you communicate with your peers to accomplish the tasks? How does this experience relate to your earlier perceptions of your communication abilities and styles?

The assignment also included a summary on what they have learned about their abilities and styles and how this will inform how they promote health, specifically community health.

Student reflection papers applied the I-ARC well and their reflection and communication sections, in particular, were rich and deep. The following quotes, taken from the papers, represent some of the students’ introspection.

**Inquiry**

“Some questions that came to mind while doing this was: “How can we get everyone across without anyone falling in,” or “How can we make sure that all partners that weren’t blindfolded are giving the same instructions to their partners?” I also had to question my personal abilities to be able to walk and jump without being able to see.”

**Application**

“One thing we learned during the last activity where we had to talk to “health professionals” was that sometimes professionals will have specific tasks for you, and they are not always explicitly specific. This makes it hard to communicate, but when you adjust to it, if you work as a team it is easy to get specific tasks accomplished. We also applied our knowledge of important communication and teamwork to build the “project”. It was important to use the knowledge we learned in the first two activities on how to best
collaborate in the final activity.”

“I learned how to be guided across the hot chocolate river by stepping on marshmallows and trust in the ones that could actually see. It is hard to trust teammates who you just meet, but it turned out to be a success. Another time during the team building exercises, I learned and applied leadership when we were to build a structure according to what the health professionals drew up on the other side of the wall. I learned to listen and cooperate with the team even if it wasn’t turning out like I envisioned. Sometimes you have to roll with the punches before leading.”

“The application part of this experience was my favorite, to see how everything would play out, moving from our thoughts into action. I learned that everyone tackles a problem by different means, and solves them using their given strengths. As each activity progressed, our awareness of it became heightened, and during our process we were constantly re-strategizing to apply a new technique. For example, the task where we had to reconstruct something with the same pieces as another group, without being able to look at it, only going on verbal communication with the other team. From the beginning, our group had a strong strategy and we each knew our individual piece of the whole. But, as the challenge progressed, we saw that what we expect in life isn’t always going to hold true.”

Reflection
“In conclusion, the overall experience really gave me more confidence in myself, realizing that I can communicate and help accomplish tasks, especially in a group setting.”

“The Campus Rec. teamwork training highlighted the importance of teamwork, communication, and individual and community responsibility, while also revealing the significance of being able to ‘trust’ your neighbor. Through our initially uncomfortable experiences we grew to appreciate and respect one another for the unique set of skills that each individual brought to the situation. Likewise, we recognized our own limits and learned how to better communicate our unique needs.”

Communication
“My earlier perceptions of my communication abilities and skills was that I was a bit shy and didn't contribute as much as I could. This time around I felt like I contributed a lot more, and wanted the group to see I cared about our success. I did much better stepping into leadership roles as well towards the end.”

“From my earlier perceptions when working with groups, usually there is a leader or someone that comes up with most of the ideas and everyone just agrees. This week when classmates came up with ideas we all talked about how they could work and how they might not. I thought this worked really well for us because we were able to successfully do all of the activities collaboratively.”
“I wish that all of my classes started out with teambuilding… We need to be able to work with anyone and that’s where these skills come into play. I feel like communication and problem solving skills are what we learned the most while doing our team building activities and they will surely be helpful in the near future.”

Summary
“Overall, I think all of the information I have learned from both the team building and personality test will help my experience in community health through allowing me to have more patience and understanding of others. The activities helped me to see the diversity of emotions and behaviors in individuals, and the accomplishments that can happen when individuals work together. I will use this experience to try and view others from a non-biased and non-judgmental perspective that would otherwise ultimately block and hinder my ability to coach and lead them. This has been a great experience in getting to know the class, and ourselves as a leader, coach, and problem-solver.”

Conclusion
The team-building experiences provided a valuable opportunity for students to get to know each other a little better, setting a positive and collaborative tone for the semester. In addition, the challenges had application to our course objectives and they involved a good deal of critical thinking and problem solving. Students’ reflection papers used the I-ARC framework to provide an opportunity for deeper insights and allowed students to become familiar with a key element of the course and our curricular focus at UNC Asheville. I appreciate very much this opportunity and I look forward to utilizing similar experiences in the future.