Climbing Wall Instructor Abseil Module

Guidance notes for trainers and assessors

Contents

Introduction

This module is optional and is designed to equip Climbing Wall Instructors with the skills and techniques required for managing top-roping and abseiling groups on purpose-built artificial climbing walls and structures. Awareness of the skills outlined in the main Climbing Wall Instructor syllabus is assumed and not repeated here. These guidance notes should be used together with the Climbing Wall Instructor Abseil Module candidate handbook.

Candidate experience

• It is important candidates have the appropriate level of experience to allow engagement with course content. Candidates must satisfy the prerequisites for training and assessment courses. This must be evidenced in writing, we strongly prefer candidates record this information within DLOG.

• A thorough review of a candidate's logbook in advance of the course should provide the course director with information about their breadth, depth and currency of experience. It's important to scrutinise the quality, not just the quantity.

Responsibility for safety

• Course directors and staff should remember that they are ultimately responsible for the safety of everyone, during any training or assessment course, and will do all they can to prevent accidents leading to physical or mental injury.

• The Climbing Wall Instructor Abseil Module is for candidates who have completed their Climbing Wall Instructor training and are experienced indoor climbers who also have experience of abseiling. While course staff should endeavour to maintain a safe working environment, participants should be reminded that they also have a duty to exercise judgment regarding their own personal safety and that of other members of the group.

• Trainers and assessors should be mindful of the psychological pressure candidates may feel to perform. This can be effectively managed by course staff through attentiveness to the group's needs, recognition of individual differences, and an understanding of how group dynamics and the environment interact. Course staff self-awareness is also essential; understanding one's own strengths, limitations, and training or assessment style supports informed decision-making and contributes to safer outcomes.

Venue choice

• Course directors should select venues carefully, bearing in mind the aims and objectives of the day.

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- Platforms or stances designed for top-roping and abseiling are incorporated into walls and towers in a variety of ways. Some stances may be inappropriate for both abseiling and top-roping, and others may be dual use.

- Walls may not permit public access to their top-roping and abseiling facilities, and even where access is available, it may be necessary to undergo a separate induction before such facilities can be used.

- Training and assessment courses will need access to one abseil platform/stance each but it would be advantageous if these offered the ability to set up different systems in order to discuss their pros and cons. It is preferable for assessments to take place at a different venue to the candidates' training venue/s.

General

- Training and assessment courses should facilitate open discussion.

- Assessors should set realistic tasks or scenarios rather than request specific techniques be demonstrated. Tasks set should not demand solutions that use techniques beyond the scope of the qualification.

- If assessment candidates are unable to demonstrate competence initially, other opportunities should be given where possible or appropriate.

- Course staff should encourage candidates to engage in reflective practice recognising they, in turn, must foster this in participants they subsequently instruct

In conclusion, Climbing Wall Instructor Abseil Module courses are for participants with considerable personal experience. While course staff should endeavour to maintain a safe working environment, participants also have a duty to exercise judgment regarding their own personal safety and that of other members of the group.

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1. Equipment

Trainers:

Candidates should be encouraged to bring along their own equipment to the course. This can prompt good discussion on its use, care and maintenance in line with manufacturers' guidance. Additional items should be supplied by the course provider, particularly items which are widely used when top roping or abseiling with groups. Good sources of additional information should be highlighted.

Indoor abseiling and top-roping venues should be chosen to maximise the candidates' contact with in-situ equipment, with time allocated for discussion around evaluating its condition and appropriate use for abseiling and/or top-roping.

Different walls provide a variety of top-rope anchors. The greatest variation is likely to be in anchor type, anchor height and distance relative to the belaying position. However, it may not be possible for trainers to demonstrate this variation practically at a single venue.

Assessors:

As with training courses, candidates should be encouraged to bring their own equipment to assessment courses. They should be able to talk through their choice of equipment, suitability, its history of use and maintenance. Candidates should know where to access information on appropriate use of equipment if they appear unsure. Candidates should understand the importance of adhering to the rules of the climbing wall when using fixed equipment.

Additionally, if a home research or question paper is used, a section on equipment should be included to ask more in-depth questions about equipment use, care and maintenance.

Top tips:

- Etiquette around using fixed equipment should be addressed on both training and assessment courses.
- Manufacturers produce great resources with detailed information on their climbing equipment. Consider using some of their materials to teach or to set tasks such as learning how to use a new piece of equipment or researching the storage and maintenance requirements.

- Differentiating between equipment appropriate for use as an independent climber and an instructor can be very productive. When doing so reference can be made to manual and assisted braking devices.

2. Personal safety

Trainers:

Throughout any training course there will inevitably be times when all or some of the group will be operating from the top of the wall. Trainers should teach the candidates a range of techniques for safeguarding themselves which can be applied to a variety of different venue types. These methods need to may be carried out with commonly used climbing equipment, which may involve some level of improvisation.

Assessors:

The assessment of personal safety is a continual process throughout the assessment course. Candidates need to demonstrate they can choose appropriate methods to safeguard themselves which are effective and efficient. Personal safety is of the utmost importance when abseiling or top-roping; therefore this aspect of the syllabus should have a strong theme to it and feature throughout the course.

3. Belaying

Trainers:

Attaching the rope to the harness should follow the manufacturer's guidelines, which typically are printed on the harness. Discussion should take place around the advantages and disadvantages of tying in directly versus clipping in with a karabiner and how these techniques may differ depending on the circumstances.

Top-rope systems are often not left in-situ. Candidates should be taught different ways to set them up in a safe and efficient manner. Different top-rope systems will be applicable to different situations. Candidates should be aware of a range of different techniques and their advantages and disadvantages in different circumstances. Candidates should understand the difference between direct and indirect belays and how they are applicable to the climbing wall top-rope environment.

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Top-roping venues vary greatly with regard to access to stances, anchor type and location. Candidates should be taught to consult facility staff if unsure about the appropriate use of specific in-situ anchors.

Competent belaying in a top-rope context is an essential skill and includes being able to hold a fall or slip and carry out controlled lowers. Throughout the training course candidates should be encouraged to demonstrate model belaying technique appropriate to the device, ensuring both their safety and that of the climber, whilst providing an 'expert model' example.

Assessors:

Candidates should be queried on their choice of tie-in method. They should be able to clearly explain their reasoning and its limitations in different contexts.

Giving candidates a practical scenario to complete will clearly show the depth and understanding of their knowledge and experience. This approach is preferable to setting specific tasks to complete. For example, asking a candidate to set up a top-rope climb for a particular group at a particular section of the wall will require them to consider many more factors than simply being asked to set up a top-rope.

The assessment of belaying skills needs to encompass the candidate's decision-making process. Specific sections of the syllabus, such as 'holding falls and controlling lowers' should be part of a wider scenario. A close level of supervision in a controlled situation is required with this aspect of the syllabus where the assessor can easily intervene if required.

Top tips:

- Training and assessing of top-rope belaying skills requires close, effective oversight and if required, a back-up.
- Use a variety of different belay devices, ropes (varying diameters) and venues (indoor slab, outdoor tower etc.) to give a broad context to the skills.

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4. Abseiling

Trainers:

Abseiling forms two parts of the training course. The first is the candidate having an ability to abseil themselves with a suitable back-up (such as a prusik) and the second as an activity with groups using a back-up rope and commonly involving a releasable system.

Personal safety is a key theme throughout abseiling and close supervision is required from the trainer. Candidates could theoretically arrive on training with no abseiling experience. Trainers should never underestimate the value of a safety rope when exploring the effectiveness of personal abseil back-up systems with candidates.

Trainers should discuss with candidates how to assess best use of a platform or stance designed for top-roping/abseiling. Avoiding conflict with other climbers at the venue should be taken into consideration.

Candidates should be introduced to common devices for abseiling and their advantages and disadvantages. They should also be aware of how to make use of different anchor points for the abseil rope and safety rope (e.g. equalised chains or a belay bar) and the care needed when using a single anchor point. Equalising multiple anchor points is beyond the scope of the Climbing Wall Instructor Abseil module.

Trainers should ensure candidates have an understanding of the impact of weather when abseiling on artificial structures. This can be covered by selection of an outdoor venue or through discussion of images of examples of outdoor structures.

Assessors:

Candidates should clearly demonstrate that they are able to abseil independently using a suitable back-up (such as a prusik). In addition, they should be able to set up and competently manage a group abseil using a releasable system. Purpose-built abseil stations may be used, with conveniently placed high anchors, as well as stances that may commonly be used for top-roping. Candidates should be able to adapt their rope systems and group management styles to suit different locations.

In both cases this should involve appropriate anchor selection and effective personal safety. If an assessor has any cause for concern about a candidate's ability, then a safety rope should be considered.

Candidates must be able to safely supervise an abseiling activity for a group of novices. This will involve a releasable system. The assessment of the candidates' skills should include rigging appropriate safety systems to avoid simple problems occurring. In addition it should

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include all aspects of group management, particularly in managing the group, both top and bottom, at the abseil site prior to abseiling. Emphasis on good and effective communication skills is needed throughout the activity.

5. Leadership and decision-making

Trainers:

Candidates' knowledge and understanding of the Mountain Training ethos, leadership model and behaviours should be explored in the context of abseiling and top-roping activities.

Trainers should ensure candidates are aware of the need to ensure their group has a clear **vision** of the abseiling process and both their own and others' roles in providing **support** to abseilers/top-ropers whilst they undertake an appropriate level of **challenge**.

The importance of communication both before and during the activity and how the candidate's position can affect this should be made clear.

Assessors:

It can be challenging to provide genuine leadership situations on assessment. For example, groups of assessment candidates are not likely to react like a novice party. Much assessment however can be achieved by careful questioning throughout the course as situations arise. Assessors should consider introducing the Vision Support Challenge model at the beginning of the assessment and use this to help frame the assessment process and manage candidates' expectations.

Assessors should be clear in their own minds as to which aspects of leadership they can assess within the structure of the course. They should carefully consider how they use simulated situations for assessment and should make clear to candidates what is being assessed at any given time. Self-evaluation (using Vision Support Challenge as a framework) should be encouraged because being an effective leader depends upon leaders being aware of their behaviours, strengths and limitations.

Managing a group abseil is a task that requires technical focus (e.g. teaching knots or belaying, rigging tasks or introducing movement techniques) and also demands positive group management. Within this task aspects of group management, such as briefings and communication are relatively easy to evaluate, as are the choice and preparation of personal equipment and reaction to set emergency situations.

Top tips:

- Encourage candidates to think of observable behaviours that demonstrate the leadership competencies. The Vision Support Challenge and situational leadership models can help with this.
- Ask candidates to describe or enact leadership behaviours on the course as relevant situations arise e.g. 'What would you say/do to a mixed ability group before starting climbing activities to create an inclusive and positive team spirit for the day?'

6. Managing and supervising other staff

Trainers:

Assistants are commonly deployed to support instructors with abseiling activities. Candidates need to understand that a qualified instructor remains responsible, and therefore liable, for the actions of any assistants and volunteers supporting their sessions. The instructor must assess the competence of each individual, and the demands of the situation before deploying them. Scenario-based discussions on the role and management of assistants could be used to illustrate the range of judgements and decisions that an instructor will need to make. Trainers may also want to model management styles using course members in scenario-based roles.

Assessors:

Assessors should explore the candidates' judgement of an assistant's capabilities and the role they give to them. Assessors should also examine how the candidate supervises other staff given specific scenarios. These could be demonstrated using mock students and attending assistants or could be modelled within the assessment course. Appropriate supervision requires the ability to intervene if necessary and candidates should be able to justify that their decisions and actions were appropriate.

7. Knowledge and demonstration of techniques

Trainers:

A key skill of a Climbing Wall Instructor running an abseil session is their ability to demonstrate sound abseil technique. During training, candidates should see and discuss what makes an effective demonstration on the skills of abseiling: fitting a harness, threading the abseil rope through the device, and body positioning. The training course should give good opportunity for each candidate to practise demonstrations, for active discussion among the group and subsequent feedback to take place.

Trainers should introduce candidates to a range of current, commonly used abseil equipment and give examples of how they might instruct others on their use. This should include personal, group and in-situ climbing equipment.

Facilities may dictate how equipment is used during sessions. Candidates should be encouraged to consider the rules of the facility prior to running the session. If unsure they should be encouraged to seek further clarity.

Climbing Wall Instructors commonly work with novices. For this reason it is important they are comfortable running sessions with a range of groups with limited experience. This will involve top-roped climbing and abseiling. Instructors should be able to teach these activities in a fun, engaging and progressive way. Trainers should develop these skills drawing on their own and the candidate's prior experience.

Assessors:

Unlike many aspects of the syllabus which are assessed as part of a wider scenario, the "deliver technical abseiling instruction to individuals and the group" can be assessed in isolation, for example: demonstrate an effective abseil. The candidates should be given the opportunity for timely feedback and if required this aspect can be revisited on several occasions throughout the assessment. There is benefit in reviewing this task within the whole group as a way of sharing more information and if appropriate giving further training to enhance the knowledge and skills of the candidates.

Assessors should ensure candidates are able to supervise novice groups abseiling. Activity should be safe, progressive and fun for all. Candidates should be aware of the needs of the participants and be able to switch between different activities to ensure full engagement.

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8. Hazards and emergency procedures

Trainers:

There is great variation in the construction and design of top-roping and abseiling facilities, and trainers should make candidates aware of management strategies that would be appropriate for a variety of situations including safeguarding a group once at the top of a wall.

Access may be straightforward, such as a staircase, or more involved, such as top-rope access only. Once positioned at the top, there may be a secure area for groups to congregate, requiring limited direct management. Alternatively, there may be a platform with no railings or other security, necessitating a clear strategy to safeguard both supervisor and group. Adaptable systems should be demonstrated and typical setups discussed.

Problem avoidance is a key focus of the Abseil Module, therefore a good amount of dedicated time is required during the course to help candidates build knowledge about management techniques. This will assist them in identifying potential and common issues along with simple strategies to avoid them, and as a last resort, deal with them appropriately. Given that most issues can simply be avoided, only minor additional skills are required to deal with less likely issues.

Discussion should take place on how to avoid running into common problems when abseiling, as most are foreseeable and so should not occur. Methods of solving simple problems should be covered at training, but the emphasis should be placed on the skills and judgements required to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Examples of simple problems include:

- Tangled ropes
- Jammed abseil device
- Abseiler moving off-route

Candidates should be encouraged to experiment with a range of basic techniques and the limitations of each. For reference the candidate guidance notes state; There is no need for a Climbing Wall Instructor to carry out roped rescues on the wall without further, site specific training. Trainers therefore, should not introduce strategies which involve the instructor leaving the ground other than on a top-rope or abseil to offer non-technical support.

Assessors:

Candidates can be tasked to review the suitability of a given venue for a particular group as a way for the assessor to gauge their knowledge. The home research or question paper can be

used to address in more detail some of the subjects surrounding organising sessions and emergency procedures.

Assessors should use scenario-based approaches to set tasks which require the candidate to make judgements in a realistic way. Candidates should be given a range of scenarios to enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and communication skills as they seek to avoid common problems occurring.

Assessors should then build upon the scenarios and consider what common occurrences may happen given the setup, location and group. These additional scenarios should be realistic for the given environment and used to prompt further discussion within the group.

Top tips:

- Get candidates to individually assess a venue for risks and opportunities. This can be reported back verbally or in writing.
- Use a scenario-based approach to group management to help draw in wider issues.
- The focus needs to be on the avoidance of issues, rather than the solving of problems.
- Avoiding, and if required, resolving common problems should be a discreet part of the course and should not stray into complex additional issues.
- Prusiking, counter-balance abseils, and snatch rescues are beyond the scope of the Climbing Wall Instructor scheme.

9. Teaching and learning skills

Trainers:

Time should be spent looking at how instructors can alter their activities and delivery style to teach abseiling to different groups. Being able to alter their language, calibrating the level of challenge, gamifying activities, introducing competition where appropriate, letting students experiment, giving clear demonstrations, and setting appropriate goals are all essential teaching tools.

Reflective practice is the key to improving teaching skills and candidates should be encouraged to approach more experienced instructors for feedback and to experiment by modelling different behaviours with groups. The Mountain Training Abseil Module Skills Checklist and Action Plan are useful tools to facilitate this process.

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Assessors:

Candidates need to be able to command the attention of their groups and deliver knowledge and instructions to their participants with clarity. There should be a good structure to what they say, and they should have developed a habit of checking for understanding from their group using a range of methods.

They should be able to plan and adapt activities that are appropriate for the group and that achieve defined outcomes. They should keep the group engaged and enthused by facilitating the appropriate type of activity, level of challenge and pace of delivery. Candidates should also be able to evaluate students' progress and signpost them to appropriate avenues for further development.

Written and verbal self-evaluation will give the assessor good insight into the candidate's ability to reflect on and adjust their approach. All these skills can be modelled with peers but a truer assessment of a candidate's ability to teach and facilitate learning will be better observed with a student group.

Top tips:

- Setting scenario-based lesson plans is a good way to assess a candidate's choice of activity and delivery.
- Look for behaviours that can be described, recorded and fed back to the candidate, e.g. voice characteristics, eye contact, use of names, body position and language, quantity of talk and activity, pace, attention to individuals, giving feedback and encouragement etc.
- Setting different teaching scenarios for the same skill development will test candidates' abilities to adapt their plan and style of delivery.

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