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TRAINING METHODOLOGIES Some Thoughts about Experiential Learning

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*'A mind that is stretched by a new experience will never go back to it's old dimension'
(Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound)*

Experiential learning as an approach to education and therapy has grown in popularity over the past 20 years. In spite of its relative popularity, experiential learning remains a concept that is easier to experience than explain and it encompasses many different viewpoints (Nadler and Luckner).

Experiential learning, sometimes called 'learning by doing', is a method that is often used in international training courses, most of the time to work on group dynamics and intercultural learning. However, experiential learning is more than only learning by doing or using active methods.

In this short article, I will try to give some basic information on this method. I do not intend to be complete, and like the name of the method says, it is better to experience than to talk or write about it.

The inspiration for this article I found in one of the best books at the moment on this topic, "Processing the experience, strategies to enhance and generalise learning" by Luckner and Nadler.

Those of you who like to surf on the internet can also have a look at a website which was made by Mark Taylor after an Action D training course on experiential learning in Lithuania. There you will find some theory, activities and links to other educational sites.

This is the address : <http://www.angelfire.com/mt/Roofonfire/index.html>

A general view

"Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you"
(Aldous Huxley)

Experiential learning is learning through doing. It is a process through which individuals construct knowledge, acquire skills and values from direct experience. (Association of Experiential Education, 1995). Experiential learning occurs when individuals engage in some activity, reflect upon the activity critically, derive some useful insight from the analysis and incorporate the result through a change in understanding and/or behaviour.

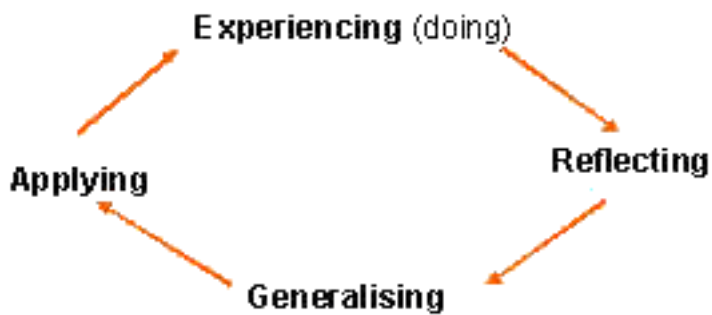
"Experiential learning is based on the assumption that all knowing must begin with the individual's relationship to the topic. The effectiveness of experiential learning is derived from the idea that nothing is more relevant to us than ourselves. What experiential learning does best is to install a sense of ownership over what is learned. It adds to the interest and involvement of participants but, most importantly, it contributes significantly to the transfer of learning. *The ultimate result is that individuals accept responsibility for their own learning and behaviour, rather than assigning that responsibility to someone else*" (Nadler and Luckner, italics added by writer).

The experiential learning cycle

" Our lives are comprised of billions of experiences. What is most important though is not just the quantity and quality of these experiences but what we learn from each experience.
(Cousins, 1981)

The basis of experiential learning is the idea that only doing (experiences) is not enough. It is the reflecting upon the experience and the learning from this experience that can lead to better understanding and/or change. The experiential learning cycle makes this basis clear.

Diagram of the experiential learning cycle:



Experiencing

Learning experiences are generated naturally in one's daily life, but they can also be arranged to provide opportunities for specific learning (group dynamics, intercultural learning etc.). Once specific learning objectives are identified many types of learning can be selected to facilitate their achievement. This structured experience is the stage in which participants participate in a specific activity, with a specific objective (e.g. to make people aware of the differences in a multicultural group). These activities can be co-operation and communication activities but also simulation games, role-plays etc.

If the process stops after this stage, all learning is left to chance and the trainers have not fulfilled their responsibilities for facilitating participants' learning. (It would be like doing the Albatross exercise without a reflection afterwards. See also "The Albatross Dilemma" in this issue of Coyote.)

Reflecting

The reflection process turns experience into experiential learning. People have experienced an activity and time needs to be allocated for participants to look back and examine what they have seen, felt and thought during the activity (e.g. how did we experience the differences in our multicultural group?).

Reflection may be an introspective act in which the learner alone integrates the new experience with the old, or it may be a group process where the experience gains a sense through discussion. Feedback of other participants can help to better see and feel these experiences and emotions.

Generalising

If learning should be transferred from the structured experience to other situations and settings, it is essential for individuals to be able to make links from this specific experience to everyday life. An essential aspect of experiential learning is the search for patterns. Patterns unite the previously isolated incidents. This search for patterns is undertaken to explore whether emotions, thoughts, behaviours or observations occur with some regularity. Is this something I recognise in myself? (e.g. Did I experience this before? Did I react in the same way in previous experiences in multicultural groups? Etc.)

When these emotions, thoughts, behaviours or observations can be understood in one situation, this understanding can be generalised and applied to other situations. Thus the generalisations are to be made about 'what tends to happen', not about what specifically happened in this particular experience.

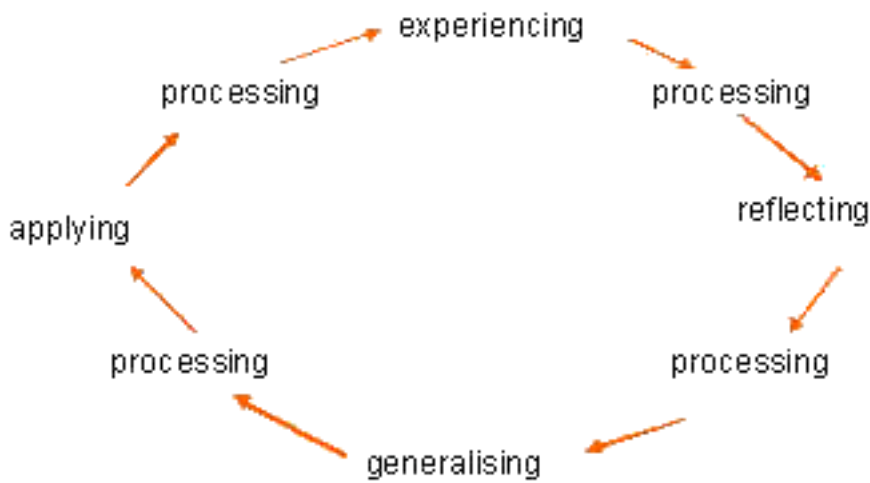
Applying

For experiential learning to be effective, it is necessary for participants to use the learning that they acquired through participation in the structured experience and to make a link to the outside world.

At this point, participants are encouraged to plan ways to put in action the generalisations that they identified in the previous stage. This procedure of shifting the attention from the structured experience to actual situations and settings in participants' daily life makes experiential learning practical and meaningful. (e.g. What did I learn from this experience and...what will I do with it?)

As indicated in the diagram above, there is an arrow from applying to experiencing. This arrow indicates the belief that the application of learning becomes part of the background knowledge for the next experience. Participants can experiment with their new knowledge in the next activity, reflect on it, generalise and apply it, and the circle goes on...

Processing the experience



The task of the trainer in this learning cycle is to facilitate the participants' learning, to help the participant to go through the different steps of the process. This is called 'processing'. Processing is best viewed as an activity that is structured to encourage participants to plan, reflect, describe, analyse and communicate about experiences and to learn from them. As shown in the diagram, processing leads participants through the different steps.

Processing activities can be used:

- to help participants to focus or increase their awareness on issues before the activity, or on the entire experience;
- to facilitate awareness or promote change while an experience (activity) is occurring;
- to reflect, analyse, describe or discuss an experience after it is completed;
- to help participants to give feedback to their colleagues;
- to reinforce perceptions of change and promote their integration in participants' lives after the experience is completed.

Some intercultural issues

I strongly believe that the experiential learning method is very useful in an international context to work on issues of intercultural communication, group dynamics, self-development or teamwork, because this method makes a link between the head and the belly, between learning through feelings and emotions and an abstract learning process.

When facilitating experiential learning in a multicultural setting, it is important to be aware of cultural and ethnic backgrounds in order to provide an optimal learning environment. Ideally, experiential learning activities can encourage people to experience different cultures as a source of learning. These activities can provide a structure to foster understanding, acceptance and constructive relations among people from different

backgrounds.

Conclusions

It is important to know that

- experiential learning is not only offering participants, young people, structured experiences but also reflection upon these experiences in order to learn from them, to link them to their own lives and to experiment with this new knowledge in the following activities and in their daily life.
- these activities or experiences have to be organised according to your objectives and according to the dynamics of the group and need to be adapted to the level of your group.

It is not you as the trainer or leader who decides on what participants have to learn. Rather, the participants learn from themselves and from the group. The leader's task is to see what is going on in the group and build activities upon these observations and reflections.

It is easy to write about experiential learning but not always so easy to do it. Again, experience will help to become a good experiential learning trainer/youth worker.