

At the boundaries of our images (1): the change of task-related metaphors

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In a previous paper (1998) I have presented experiential learning as a process of metaphor development. That means: a process in which we change, where and when appropriate, our images of a variety of things and events. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) referred to these images as “the metaphors we live by”. Such metaphors range from the relatively simple images we have about specific tasks or daily used objects, for example, to the very complex and deeply rooted images of ourselves and others, views on relationships, assumptions about communication and conflict, visions of our future, and so on...

In this view, our task as experiential educators consists of facilitating the development of such metaphors – typically the ones at the deeper and more complex end of the spectrum. Consequentially, our work can benefit from a perspective on how this development occurs. Interesting work in this regard has been done by Donald Schön (1993; 1982), who described how the metaphors people ‘live by’ affect their actions in contexts as varied as industrial task groups, urban planning and the management of development aid. In his descriptions, he discerned a pattern in the process of metaphor change which is recognizable also in many events in adventure education programs...

As the pattern of metaphor development is more tangible in people’s approach to relatively simple and concrete tasks than with regard to the core metaphors which bare upon their relationship to themselves and others, I will start by exploring how participants’ image of the task affects their action in an adventure activity (Hovelynck, 1998).

1.1. The development of task-related metaphors

A program event in which some aspects of metaphor change are recognizable happened at

“the slope”: a rock face of about 10 meters long, at a 45° angle and without any cracks or relief much more than a few dents. The group we were working with was asked to reach the top of the slope without using any equipment, and without tramping through the surrounding bushes or using the little trail that was formed by earlier groups who came back down after their success. Having made sure they couldn’t use *any* equipment and that tied-together jeans were considered equipment too, they decided to go for it. Two participants tried to stand on the rock face and find their balance for just a moment, but the group – watching them – was easily convinced that climbing was not an option. Someone else suggested to form a “human ladder”, and as most group members nodded in agreement a few of the stronger looking men presented themselves as the base for it.

The first attempts mainly served at learning to build a solid “ladder” and to climb along this human chain soft and fast enough to reach the top before the ladder started bowing and bending. During the hour and a half that followed 6 group members made it to the top and there are 5 left to go.

At a certain moment, that number hadn’t changed any more for at least a half hour. At the top, 3 participants were still experimenting with a hanging ladder to help the last few people up the slope, but 2 others were sitting back watching the nearby river glitter in the sun. At the foot of the slope complaints about sore muscles multiplied, and every new attempt started in a chorus of deep sighs. The momentum was definitely lost...

“Imagine Dave climbing up a ladder formed by Robin, Diane and Simon?!” Everyone laughed: Robin, Diane and Simon were sent climbing the ladder because they were light, fast and flexible, while Dave volunteered to form the base of the ladder because he’s heavy, strong

and solid. “Yeah, why don’t we just *run* up!?”
Laughter again.

“Hold on! Why *don’t* we run up?!”

A first attempt was watched in disbelief. Chris didn’t make it to the top, but ran a good distance up the slope, then did as the safety instructions required and slid back down, eventually spotted and gently lowered by the others. Holly was the next one to try: she lost momentum about half way up. Dave didn’t get far. Andy ran as far as Chris, and so did Tim. Nobody was looking at the river any longer; silence had turned to encouragement, and every trial was followed by suggestions on how to proceed with its results. Chris, Andy and Tim wouldn’t make it to the top, but they could reach a two person hanging ladder. They would be the last ones. Dave could climb up the last standing ladder if Robin came down again to help support him. So Dave would be first. And Robin and Holly would make it to the hanging ladder if Chris ran behind them and gave them a gentle push in the back when they were at the end of their momentum. So Robin and Holly would go after Dave.

Not even half an hour later the entire group made it to the top.

Closer observation of program episodes such as this particular one, where a group succeeded in reaching a goal that seemed impossible, suggests several ideas worth exploring. First, the difference between possible and impossible seemed to be a matter of how the group *imagined* its task. Once the group stopped defining its activity in terms of ladders the task was accomplished fast enough to make it hard to believe that it was all that difficult. It follows that the main difficulty was their *view* on the task. Second, the group’s success seemed to depend on its capacity to not drop the possibilities offered by their first view when a new one arose: the image of the ladder kept playing an important role even after the vision of the run had presented new possibilities. It is not as if either one of the images were right or wrong. And, finally, the process of changing one’s image of the situation at hand seems to follow a pattern.

1.2. A pattern of metaphor development

The pattern in this program event can be described as a sequence of stages, the first one

of which is an *immersion in the experience*. It is a stage of active involvement in getting a job done, solving a problem, discussing some issue... It is important to note that the participants aren’t merely involved in the activity: they’re involved in what they turned the activity into by framing it the way they did. In the story above that means that they’re immersed in the experience of building and climbing human ladders.

At some point the ladder approach proved ineffective for this group, and as the participants became increasingly aware of this, *signs of stuckness* started to appear: people withdrawing in silence, blank faces from the people up top staring at the river, deep sighs... The task seems impossible.

A next stage is characterized by participants’ *coping with their frustration* with the whole situation. Two common coping strategies are taking a break – either after deciding to do so as a group or simply escaping individually – and joking. Interestingly, it is in these attempts to relieve the tense or depressed atmosphere that new metaphors often seem to be ‘triggered’. In this case a joke presented the new image. The joke didn’t intend to propose a new perspective on the task: it intended merely to lighten up the group’s mood. But it turned out to be a chance to break with the logic that had dominated the group’s work as well as with the frustration this logic lead to. The joke mainly offered an interruption.

The *triggering of a generative metaphor* is marked by the sudden awareness of the relevance of a new image. Schön refers to it as an “*unarticulated sense of similarity*” with the moment’s experience: there is a sense that the image is connected to the situation at hand.

In this case the connection seems rather clear from the beginning. Still between the initial vision of running up the slope and the moment where that is seen possible lies a process of exploring the new image. This stage is characterized by *renaming and reframing*. Renaming mainly concerns the vocabulary used: the group started to adopt a vocabulary associated with jumping, as in an athletics context, whereas their earlier language had reflected the image of ‘the slope as a wall’. Reframing refers to the change in what the participants took into account while evaluating their task from this new perspective. The length of the slope, for example, was no longer

measured in a number of people. Jeans and hiking boots weren't appreciated anymore for being strong, reliable handholds, but devaluated for being heavy and stiff, thus limiting speed and flexibility. Similarly people's strengths and weaknesses were evaluated differently. In this process of renaming and reframing the image of 'the ladder against the wall' shifted to the background, and the metaphor of 'the running jump' received its meaning.

The result of this exploration is a *mapped metaphor*: an explicit account of how the image of the slope as a running jump offers a new solution to the problem at hand. The metaphor is "generative" (Schön, 1992) in the sense that it generates new options.

The following summary of this sequence is only intended to give an easy overview: it does not imply that I observed the pattern described in quite as linear fashion as its presentation may suggest. The 'straight' version looks as follows:

- immersion in the experience
 - sense of stuckness
- coping with frustration: jokes, break, ... – interruption
 - triggering of the generative metaphor
 - unarticulated sense of similarity
 - naming and framing
- mapping: explicit account of similarities
 - new options

In some cases, certain stages are a lot more salient than in others. In this particular story the distance between the "unarticulated sense of similarity" to "the explicit account of

similarities" seems pretty short. This can be very different in other situations (Schön, 1993; Hovelynck, 1998). And when several intertwined metaphors are involved this linear sequence may be hard to trace. But a returning observation in all these variations is that new metaphors arise when participants get frustrated with the experience they're immersed in, that they evolve from a vague feeling of relevant similarity toward an explicit 'map', and that this process leads to new possibilities.

1.3. Adventure activities as a context for learning

Obviously, participants don't attend our programs to change task-related metaphors such as 'the slope as a wall': adventure education aims to address the more complex core metaphors which affect the way participants relate not only to specific tasks, but also to themselves and their environment.

What I suggest is, first, that the pattern I traced in the events on the slope is also recognizable in the development of images of oneself and others, views on relationships, metaphors of communication and conflict, visions of one's future, and related issues. Second, I suggest that concrete adventure activities may offer contexts in which participants can trace relatively easily how they got stuck in their view of things, and what it took to adopt a new and generative image. As experiential training has typically included 'learning to learn' as an important program objective, a focus on the change of task-related metaphors may therefore be beneficial.

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At the boundaries of our images (2): the development of life metaphors

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the development of life metaphors. *Horizons* 17(8), 52-55

In the first article in this series, I have documented the process of metaphor development as it occurred in a concrete outdoor activity. In this process I discerned a pattern, observing that new metaphors tend to arise when people get frustrated with the experience they're immersed in, and that they evolve from a vague feeling of relevant similarity toward an explicitly "mapped" metaphor (Schön, 1993). I suggested that this process created new possibilities for action, or in other words: that this process lends to the metaphor its "generative capacity".

While I pointed out that the development of task-related metaphors is more tangible, and therefore of interest to a better understanding of the 'metaphorizing' process, I also noted that adventure education aims to address the more complex metaphors participants "live by", or their "life metaphors" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These include their images of themselves and others, their views on relationships, their assumptions about communication and conflict, visions of their future, and so on.

In this second part of this series, I will document how "life metaphors" develop along the same lines as the task-related metaphors described in the first part. More specifically, this article will focus on the meaning of participants' 'immersion in the experience' and their 'sense of stuckness.' It will also start to explore what the implications are for facilitating experiential learning.

2.1. Participants' enactment of life metaphors

The following course fragment was presented to me by a colleague. While working a ropes course program she had presented the high balance beam. One of the participants was a young woman who seemed particularly afraid of this event. She briefly mentioned being afraid, but firmly intended to conquer her fear.

While some of her group members took their turns crossing the beam, she spent considerable time debating whether to go for it or not. Yet conversations with other group members strengthened her intention to fight her fear. Despite the fairly long debate her decision to go felt sudden: she wanted to go "now". She climbed the pole to the level of the beam, fast, but when the regular pattern of the staples in the wood slightly changed to bring climbers onto the beam itself, she decided in a split second to come down again. Back on the ground, she untied her belay rope and walked away a little distance. When the facilitator checked in with her later on, she was upset that she hadn't succeeded crossing and upset that what she had expected had also happened.

I choose this fragment because it seems a good illustration of a metaphor often enacted in adventure programs, and very common in several Western cultures. The woman herself expressed it by referring to her fear in terms of "fighting" and "conquering". Note that her vocabulary was only one of several indicators. Other non-verbal indicators included her narrowed range of attention, as manifested in her inability to help belaying other group members or in her inability to deal with the minimal change in the position of the staples. In other words: I am not trying to make a big deal out of participants' vocabulary. But their language gives important cues to the contents of the *figure of thought* which underlies the behavior that I see – which in this case is the image of a fight, which you either win or lose, and where the alternative to 'fight' is 'flight'.

Events such as this one are commonly explained in terms of participants' *reactions* to a perceived reality. Such a perspective tends to lead to questions about the accuracy of their perception. What strikes me in this fragment, however, is how – almost regardless of how

accurate her perception was – the woman made her image real. She viewed her fear as an emotion to be fought. As if she needed to fight it. And in doing so, she turned the activity into a fight: she *enacted* a metaphor that she lived by. If we understand this events in terms of *enactment*, rather than as a reaction to a perceived reality, questions about how ‘realistic’ the participant’s images are, become irrelevant. The crucial question is what reality their images generate, and what possibilities and restrictions they entail.

In addition, it appears from the events after the woman had descended from the element that her ‘fighting’ and ‘flighting’ had happened before. Her saying so acknowledged that this image was indeed a life metaphor, in the sense that it exceeded the course context, but she wasn’t ready at that moment to further address it. In a way, this case presents a missed opportunity.

2.2. Immersion in idiosyncratic experience and a sense of stuckness

That the beam provides a scene for the enactment of very different metaphors can be illustrated by the following episode from a course for educators. The participants worked on a high beam over a 7 to 8 meter wide white water canyon. They took turns crossing the beam, exchanging impressions, watching others, encouraging them, reviewing amongst each other and so on. One of the group members had crossed the beam forwards, backwards and sideways, had sat down in the middle, turned around half-way and probably did it in a number of other ways. As he would rarely deny the invitation to “give it another go”, his attempts succeeded each other rather quickly. Between two turns he checked in with the others:

- “Have you already done this?”
- “What else is there I need to try?”
- “Is there another way to cross?”
- “Oh, try this!”

His approach seemed to reflect a view that required him to compose an exhaustive list of options and do them all. Through the questions he asked and the answers he received this image solidified itself.

If we understand experiential learning as a process which occurs when people recognize the implicit ‘figures of thought’ which underlie their action, and develop additional ones (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 99), the cases I presented suggest several implications for experiential training and education. A first implication concerns the need for facilitators to recognize that the beam isn’t a given reality with inherent meaning. The beam is not a ‘balance’ beam to all of our participants just because that is what we mostly call it among colleagues, but a ‘fear fighting’ beam for one participant and a ‘done-it-all’ beam for another one. Consequentially, in the pattern of metaphor development which I introduced in the first part of this series, “immersed in the experience” does not mean the same as “busy with the activity”. What participants are immersed in is the experience which they create by enacting their idiosyncratic metaphors (Bell, 1993, 23; Hovelynck, 1999, 3-4).

Secondly, this implies that experiential learning requires facilitators to provide space for participants’ enactment of these unique ‘figures of thought’. In the cases presented, providing such a space may include being careful not to introduce the beam as a ‘balance’ beam too lightly, and clearing the stage for the woman to enact a ‘fear fighting’ beam or for the educator to create a ‘done-it-all’ beam. While the state of the art in adventure education has repeatedly been associated with different ways in which the facilitator can introduce meaning to activities, the perspective proposed in this series implies the decision to leave participants’ own implicit introduction in place. In this regard: Stephen Bacon has mostly been quoted as the author of a metaphoric framing approach in adventure education, which promotes that facilitators give meaning to outdoor activities through elaborate introductions. However, Bacon’s statements that “best of all is no introduction” and “next best is a relatively undefined introduction” (Bacon, 1987, 15) clearly argue that the primary stance in experiential education consists of leaving the participants’ implicit introduction in place. This is the case, first, because such approach stages the metaphors *participants* live by, and, second, because these metaphors’ enactment appears to be a condition for their development. Leslie

Greenberg's computer metaphor captures this second reason very appropriately: "You can't change a program unless it's up and running" (1994).

Thirdly, my analysis of metaphor development suggests that participants' recognition of their implicit figures of thought and their development of new ones is closely related to some sense of stuckness and attempts to cope with it. As such, moments of stuckness represent a prime moment for facilitator intervention: participants' sense of stuckness tends to increase their readiness to focus on the restrictive figures of thought and simultaneously increase their receptiveness to facilitator intervention (Hovelynck, 1998, 12). This is the central idea of "edgework" (Nadler & Luckner, 1992, 59).

The two cases that I presented in this article provide more information on the possible nature of 'edge moments' during adventure programs, and some hints of what 'intervening at the edge' may look like. As mentioned above, the case of the woman's 'fear fighting'-beam in some ways represents a missed opportunity. In the Edgework perspective, a key moment in facilitation would ideally consist of asking our participant what was happening at the very moment she got stuck at the level of the beam. To this woman, that moment presented the choice between turning back or expanding her repertoire: her image of 'fear as an emotion to be fought' didn't yield satisfying options any longer. She reached the edge of the metaphor's generative capacity. Whereas my colleague and I believe that intervening at the edge might have contributed to the development of an alternative image of fear, and that this would have generated new options, the woman's decision was made in a fraction of a second. What happened after that can be summarized with Nadler and Luckner's (1992, 61) sentence: "Usually these moments pass quickly without the awareness of individuals and are generally lost for current and future learning".

The edge experience of the educator on the 'done-it-all' beam was of a very different nature. When he didn't find new options to add to his inventory anymore he turned to the facilitators. He presented his inventory and the

subsequent conversation can be summarized as follows:

- "I think I've done it all, but maybe *you* know some more alternatives?"
- "Oh, there are always more options aren't there?"
- "Like what?"
- "Have you tried standing in the middle and jumping off?"

The educator stood – on belay, obviously! – in the middle of the beam and tried to jump for about a quarter of an hour. After that, finally, he walked back off. In the later debriefing, the educator brought up his experience at the edge and raised the issue of his doing-it-all approach to a variety of events in his life.

From a facilitation point of view, the educator's stuckness adds several worthwhile aspects to our exploration of edge experiences. First, and related to what was said about the difference between being 'immersed in an experience' or 'busy with an activity', the notion of stuckness is not directly related to one's proficiency in the activity. From an activity point of view, the educator dealt with the beam very successfully. Yet he was reaching the edge of his image.

Second, as the educator sensed that he was running out of options, he turned to the facilitators, who proposed a particular task to him: a task that moved him "toward the unclear or emerging edges of his experience" (Greenberg, Rice and Elliot, 1993, 121). One may question whether or not it was appropriate to do so with a paradoxical task, which is an issue too broad to be explored in this article. Yet it seems worth emphasizing that facilitators who are sensitive to the metaphors which participants enact, can lead them toward the boundaries of their images in order to facilitate the images' exploration and development.

Lastly, a major difference between the woman's and the educator's edge experiences is the time spent at the edge, and therefore the prime time available for the participant's self-exploration and for possible facilitator intervention. This time is related to several factors, among which the nature of the metaphor and the nature of the activity.

2.3. Intervening at the edge

The case of the woman's 'fear fighting' beam and the case of the educator's 'done-it-all' beam shed some light on the events which may lead up to 'edge experiences'. These events are interpreted here as the initial stages in the pattern of metaphor development identified in the first article in this series: participants' immersion and stuckness in the experience they create by enacting their metaphors. Unlike the metaphors in the first article, however, the images presented in this part are relevant beyond the outdoor activities: the participants recognize them as life metaphors, which they enact in a variety of contexts other than the program. Within this frame, Edgework starts by recognizing that the participants bring images to the activity, by which they make sense of the events and which shape their experience.

Facilitation then requires being attentive to the metaphors participants enact and to indicators of the edge, which often seem to be signs of stuckness. It may include leading participants toward the edge of their metaphors, when they are ready for it, and facilitating further sense-making at the edge.

According to the identified pattern of metaphor development, the intervention at the edge will require listening for new metaphors, attending to their evolution from a vague image to an explicit map of options, and verifying whether this process has come to a viable closure. These aspects of Edgework have not been covered yet but will be addressed in a third article in this series – 'interventions at the edge'.

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At the boundaries of our images (3): intervening at the edge

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Intervening at the edge. *Horizons* 17(9), 20-23

In this third contribution to the Edgework series, the focus is on intervening at the edge. The larger frame of such interventions was clarified in the first two articles, which presented a perspective on how people's metaphors shape their interaction with their world. The first one focused on the role of participants' metaphors in adventure activities and described *a pattern of metaphor development*. I presented how new metaphors tend to arise when people get frustrated with the experience they're immersed in, and how they develop from a vague feeling of relevant similarity toward an explicitly "mapped" metaphor (Schön, 1993). I pointed out how this process lends the metaphor its capacity to open up new possibilities for action.

The conclusions of the first paper were mainly based on the analysis of task-related metaphors, which have little direct relevance beyond the task at hand. Yet adventure education's primary concern is with the metaphors participants "live by" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The second article therefore documented the occurrence of such more stable, deeper 'life metaphors' in adventure education. I proposed that outdoor activities primarily represent a setting in which participants can *enact* their images of themselves, their views on learning, their perspectives on group work, their metaphors of organizing, helping and so on. I suggested that, to the extent that facilitators manage to clear the stage for participants to enact their life metaphors, adventure education can render these metaphors more visible and available for development. In addition, I proposed that "moments at the edge" (Nadler & Luckner, 1997) are primary moments in facilitating this process. In this expression, the edge refers to the point where participants run into the limits of their metaphors, where the metaphors don't yield acceptable options for action any longer

or where their enactment doesn't yield the expected effects.

This third article will present a case of processing at the edge, which seems the core of Edgework. In this case, the pattern of metaphor development, which was described in the first article, can be recognized as a frame of reference for intervention.

3.1. A case study: the rappel

The following program fragment provides an illustration of metaphor development at the edge. The event took place during a rappelling activity on a five day course for a group of volunteer leaders of a humanitarian organization (Hovelynck, 1998). Seven participants had descended the 15 meter rock face when a young woman took her turn. She had mentioned her fear of heights before the activity started, but also expressed her wish to rappel despite this. Later, she was actively involved with anchoring the ropes and checking other rappellers' belays. While she watched them descend, she visibly rehearsed the different moves she would need to make to eventually rappel herself.

When she approached the edge of the cliff to rappel, one of the other group members quietly talked her through the steps to make, as she had asked him to do. On the very edge, without moving her feet, she leaned back half a meter, stayed in that position for a second, then pulled her upper body up again, stood there for a moment, leaned back again... She probably repeated this sequence five or six times, silently and without watching anyone, until the moment I asked her what was happening. Nadler (1995, 53) wrote about this moment: "one of the cardinal rules in edgework is to select a moment in the adventure-based activity when the emotions (..) are at their peak and freeze or stop that

moment.” The word ‘edgework’ felt very appropriate for the conversation that followed. We processed the experience right there, on the edge, on belay.

Whereas the woman’s initial metaphor on the edge presented the ‘rappel as a height’, this image soon shifted to the ‘rappel as a proof of competence to her father’. She spoke of how she was raised with the idea that there were “a number of things she shouldn’t even try, because they weren’t meant for her and her family, working class people.” This had included higher education, and throughout her university studies she had felt that she needed to fight her father’s prediction of failure in order to succeed in doing what she wanted to do. She had received her Master’s Degree one month before the program, and felt she now needed to prove her capacity to get a corresponding job. Her father predicted that she wouldn’t find one. Similarly, he had predicted that she wouldn’t successfully make it through the outdoor training program, despite the fact that the humanitarian organization she volunteered for had selected her for it.

Not the height, but the tiredness of fighting her father’s prediction of failure stopped her from descending. She didn’t even talk about “descending” anymore, but about “convincing.” Her leaning back and forth somehow reflected her ambiguity about the need to continuously prove herself, and her language reflected that. The option to not rappel looked totally different from the new perspective. Gradually the ‘rappel as proof’ shifted to the ‘rappel as a trap’: rappelling now stood for the decision to continue fighting her father’s prediction.

On the edge, she decided not to go.

A closer look at the events at the edge reveals the stages of metaphor change identified in the first part of this series. As the woman arrived at the edge, the enacted metaphor surfaced and her becoming aware of it set off its development. She renamed and reframed the events, and her ‘mapping’ of the metaphor clarified the meaning of her options. The facilitation of this process can be understood as attending to these stages, and guiding a cycle of metaphor change to completion.

In the remainder of this article I will, one, present the way in which the facilitation in the rappel case further supported metaphor development to completion and, two, put this approach in perspective by comparing it to alternative approaches to facilitation.

3.2. Putting Edgework in perspective

This case illustrates several aspects of processing at the edge, as proposed by Nadler and Luckner’s Edgework model. To put this approach in perspective it seems interesting to compare the facilitation in this case to alternative options for facilitating such a program event. I will therefore briefly present two widespread approaches that significantly differ from Edgework.

A first alternative approach to participants who hesitate to rappel essentially consists of increasing the levels of technical advice and encouragement. This commonly takes the form of a series of quasi-standard, technical instructions. “Hold your brake hand! Yes, well done, now lean back... Spread your feet a little more: there you go! Good job!” While this focus may be appropriate at numerous occasions, it closes a window on participants’ life metaphors and thus neglects an important learning opportunity at many others. Rather than to listen to the reference frame the participant brings to the edge, the instructor in this case frames the rappel him- or herself. The advice and the encouragement reflect the staff’s focus on the *outdoor activity* and on the participants’ *success* in this activity, and further sense-making remains implicit.

A second common alternative focuses on reviewing. The stance of the facilitator during the rappel session may vary, ranging from technical advice or encouragement to standing back as far as proper safety management allows. The emphasis in this approach is on debriefing the events. This mostly takes the form of a group meeting after the activity is completed, but its format may vary considerably (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, 114-120; Greenaway, 1996). Either way, debriefing aims to promote participants’ *reflection on the preceding events*. Put simply: it addresses the question: “What did you experience during the

rappe?” Aiming to make participants’ sense-making explicit, this second alternative differs considerably from the first one.

In contrast to the action focus of the staff in the first alternative, the facilitation in the rappel case presented here is clearly reflection-oriented. As said, the advice and encouragement in the first alternative reflect the staff’s focus on the outdoor activity and on the participant’s success in this activity. While they assume that the rappel is meaningful to the participants, they don’t pay explicit attention to the meanings involved. Edgework, in contrast, implies turning the participant’s attention to the meaning that they bring to the activity. Luckner and Nadler (1997, 35) suggest doing so by interrupting the activity – as did the facilitator in the above rappel case – with any suitable variation on the question “What are you experiencing right now?” The focus here is not on successful completion of the outdoor activity, but on the life metaphor that shapes the participant’s reality.

Compared to the reflection-orientation of the staff in the second alternative, the facilitation in the rappel case emphasizes reflection-in-action. The difference between reviewing and Edgework thus appears to be a matter of timing of intervention: debriefing means ‘reviewing’ experience *after* it took place, while processing at the edge implies looking into *present* experience. This difference in timing, however, is mostly associated with more fundamental assumptions about program facilitation. The emphasis on debriefing tends to reflect the assumption that outdoor activities provide ‘experiences’ to review, and that debriefings are a forum to ‘reflect’ on earlier action. Edgework, in contrast, enacts the idea that all events in the program – so-called debriefings as well as outdoor activities – represent ‘reflected action’. Luckner and Nadler (1997, 32) point out that edges occur not only in activities such as the rappel, but also during the introduction to outdoor activities and during group meetings. At any of these moments, ‘the edge’ is considered a window to ‘figures of thought’ underlying participants’ behavior and thus, “at the edge, the first objective is to help participants become aware of what is going on” (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, 43).

3.3. Edgework as a facilitation model

Both approaches that I proposed as alternatives to the facilitation in the rappel case can be understood in terms of the facilitation models that Stephen Bacon (1987) presented in “The evolution of the Outward Bound process”. Several authors later elaborated the facilitation models that Bacon presented, thus providing a framework to think about facilitation (Priest & Gass, 1993). These writings did not include Edgework, but nevertheless provide an interesting background to put it in perspective. In this paper, I will only address this framework to the extent that it helps clarifying the specific nature of Edgework.

The first alternative to facilitation in the rappel case fits Bacon’s description of the first “curriculum model” in outdoor education, which was focused on outdoor activities and left the meaning of these activities for participants implicit. Bacon (1987, 6) summarized these characteristics in the expression “let the mountains speak for themselves.” The second alternative represents the “second generation curriculum model (which) actively attempts to promote reflection, insight and introspection.” Bacon (1987, 9) called this approach “Outward Bound plus (imported techniques).” This name, first, indicates that explicitly addressing participants’ sense-making wasn’t at the time a very common feature of outdoor education and, two, suggests that various forms of debriefing were considered an imported technique, added to the outdoor activities, rather than an integral part of the process.

Given the emphasis on action in the first model and the emphasis on the cyclical nature of action and reflection in the second one, I refer to these approaches respectively as an “action” and an “action-reflection model” (Hovelynck, 1999, 47). In this framework, Edgework can be understood as a “reflection-in-action model”, which adopted characteristics from the action and the action-reflection models but is also fundamentally different in some respects.

As a reflection-in-action model, Edgework and the first curriculum model have in common that both *situate learning in action*. More

along the lines of the second curriculum model, however, Edgework includes *regular group meetings*. Being similar to both models in some respects, Edgework differs from an action model by emphasizing that *all action embodies reflection* and differs from a debriefing approach by acknowledging that *debriefing is an activity*, rather than a mere reflection on earlier experience. I will illustrate the implications of this point of view for facilitation by further exploring the rappel case.

3.4. The rappel as embodied reflection

The idea that the rappel – and the events in other outdoor activities – is embodied reflection has been woven through this series. The assumptions that shape our behavior are mostly tacit and often hard to express. One of the ways in which people articulate them anyway is metaphor, which I presented as the expression of a ‘figure of thought’ and which seems all too often reduced to a figure of speech.

While the facilitator in the rappel case situates learning in action, he is not action-oriented as the instructors in a ‘let-the-mountains-speak-for-themselves’ model: he views the edge as an aspect of the participants’ *experience*, not as a moment in the *activity*. Note that these two words are *not* – as often lightly assumed – synonyms! In the rappel case, ‘the edge’ does not refer to the edge of the cliff, but to the edge of the woman’s metaphor. While the metaphor’s and the cliff’s edges may at first sight coincide, a closer look reveals that crossing the cliff’s edge implied *not* crossing the metaphor’s edge, and vice versa: in order to stop fighting her father’s prediction of failure, the woman had to *not* rappel. Whereas an action-oriented facilitator would consider not descending a failure, the facilitator in the rappel case did not: the woman had become aware of a life metaphor and started to develop it in action, and the facilitator viewed this as a success.

3.5. Debriefing as a continuation of the experience

While the facilitator in the rappel case did gather the participants to debrief the rappel, he did not consider this group meeting to be a

review of the rappel as much as a continuation of the group process in a different type of activity. At the rappel site, after her decision not to descend, the woman headed back to the trail to walk down rather than rappel. She seemed sunk in thought, and when the facilitator checked in with her, her choice felt ‘unfinished’. Exploring this further clarified a final step in the cycle of metaphor development, which consisted of making a statement about her decision to not rappel to the group. The debriefing provided a space where this was possible and hence to bring the process of metaphor change to a viable closure.

3.6. Conclusion: processing at the edge

In this article, I presented a case of processing at the edge. While facilitating this program event, I didn’t think of it as Edgework. Even when analyzing this case later on I didn’t frame it as Edgework (Hovelynck, 1998). Yet the core characteristics of Edgework are recognizable in the episodes of facilitation that I described in this series. One, I presented moments of *stuckness* as a manifestation that people reach the boundaries of their figures of thought. Using Luckner and Nadler’s words, I called them ‘moments at the edge’. Two, I presented *the edge* as a window on the assumptions that underlie people’s action and as a moment where participants “experiment with a new mindset” (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, 28) in order to reach their goal. Three, I presented *facilitating* as an attempt to support this experiment, contributing to the development of images or frames that create new, more satisfying possibilities. Luckner and Nadler (1997, 29, 31, 36) speak of “breakthroughs” into a “realm of possibilities” and “advocate putting moments at the edge under a microscope and examining the feelings, patterns, conversations, physiology, beliefs, support and metaphors that encompass these moments.” In order to do so, four, I presented a number of *process indicators* of ‘the edge’. Such indicators range from saliently sudden moves or signs of a narrow attention span, such as in the ‘fear fighting case’, to participants’ explicit questions, such as in the ‘done-it-all’ case, or repetitive movements, such as in the rappel case above. Luckner and Nadler (1997, 29) mention other

indicators, including feelings of fear and excitement and a number of “physiological symptoms”.

The fact that the facilitation in these cases can be understood as Edgework despite the fact that it wasn't conceived as such, is largely due to the Gestalt background they have in common. The primary intervention in Gestalt is sometimes referred to as “fattening the moment” when participants get stuck (Penner, 1997, 65). Asking what participants experience is one way to do this; another one is to somehow mark moments when underlying images surface.

I want to conclude with two notes on the cases in this series and on Edgework as a facilitation model. First, as mentioned earlier, exploring the cases that I presented as forms of Edgework is not the same as saying that I *apply* Edgework: practice is not applied knowledge, and facilitation cannot be reduced to the application of a model. In this regard, Chris Barker, Nancy Pistrang and Robert Elliot (1994, 52) point out appropriately that performing the behaviors described in a model “does not produce socially skilled interactions;

rather the reverse, it tends to produce people who act like robots.” As a facilitation model, Edgework is mainly a frame that allows me to situate and better understand my own practice. Second, despite the fact that the cases that I presented reflect the core characteristics Luckner and Nadler describe in their book, it is my impression that their presentation of Edgework remains somewhat ambivalent with regard to the assumption that both outdoor activities and debriefings are settings in which participants enact their metaphors, and thus present ‘reflected action’. Fully acknowledging this would, for instance, question the presentation of experiential learning in terms of “experiencing”, “reflecting” and “applying” as distinct phases in a learning sequence (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, 6-9). Acknowledging this also implies that reviewing, as a “labeling procedure, is no more and no less than further information in an ongoing communication” (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1977, 59) and, consequentially, that there is no essential difference between facilitating outdoor activities and so-called debriefings. In this sense, Edgework may more radically reframe a number of issues in the field than Luckner and Nadler’s book explicitly does.

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