Recognising and exploring action-theories: 
a reflection-in-action approach 
to facilitating experiential learning

Johan Hovelynck

Outdoor education has typically presented itself as a specific approach to experiential learning. This article proposes that experiential learning can be understood as a process in which learners recognise and develop their action-theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 99) and that the aim of outdoor development programs – whether in mainstream education, corporate training or therapy – is to facilitate this process. After introducing the notion of action-theory, this article presents a particular approach to facilitation, which can be understood as a reflection-in-action approach. Finally, this approach is situated in the wider range of facilitation models in the literature on outdoor education and adventure therapy (Bacon, 1987; Gass, 1993; 1995).

1. Action-theories

An action-theory or “theory-in-use” (Argyris, 1982, 85) is a description of the “know-how we reveal in our intelligent action” (Schön, 1990, 25): it is the theory that seems to underlie our behaviour. As such, an action-theory represents an attempt to express the implicit knowing-in-action that guides our behaviour. Such an expression may take different forms. Chris Argyris and his colleagues (1985) think of action-theories as a set of interconnected propositions, each of which states a situation-specific relationship between certain actions and their consequences. The network of these propositions forms a “cognitive map” by which humans “design” their action (Argyris, Putnam & McLainSmith, 1985, 81, 239). This propositional concept of action-theory can be illustrated by the following set of statements, identified by a program participant as the assumptions underlying his fear of a narrow passage during a caving activity:

◊ “if I crawl into this hole, I may well come to a point which is too narrow for me to continue;
◊ as it is impossible to turn around in that hole, if I can’t continue, I’ll need to return backwards;
◊ as it is difficult already to crawl in forward, I will be unable to slide out again backwards;
◊ if I can’t crawl out backwards, I will be stuck!”

The participant – understandably – did not enter the passage, but he was torn by the fact that several other group members had passed before him and therefore, in a way, he was stuck already.

While action-theory can be presented as a set of statements, Donald Schön (1990, 29; 1993, 138-151) conceives action-theories in a metaphorical rather than a propositional form. In this view actors have an image of their situation, which largely designs their action possibilities. Either way, an action-theory holds the assumptions underpinning people’s action. To the participants in the second example, the fact that their image merely represents a number of assumptions becomes clear as soon as they see the entrance, which looks very different from what they had tacitly expected. In the first example, it is harder to recognise the propositions as assumptions because they appear to be ‘realistic’: the passage is narrow – too narrow to turn around. Nevertheless, the set of propositions holds decisive assumptions, as may become clear from the continuation of the caving event later in this article.
Starting from the position that experiential learning occurs when learners recognise their action-theory and develop new and additional ones when and where that seems appropriate (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 99; Brookfield, 1986), the second part of this paper explores the facilitation of this process in the context of adventure education and therapy. The approach presented is based on the recognition of surfacing moments, the interruption of events at that point in time, and the exploration of underlying action-theory while it can still affect action.

2. Facilitating participants’ reflection-in-action

When describing experiential learning as a process of recognising action-theory and the development of alternative or additional propositions or images, it seems worth emphasising that this process doesn’t only occur in the context of adventure programs or other types of experiential education. It is “part of the long-term process of making sense of our lives. We each have our own theories and explanations which we use to try to understand ourselves and the world around us. As we learn, we are trying out new ways of coping with ourselves and our worlds. (...) In other words, we give up models or theories relating to one or more aspects of our lives and replace them by others” (Rhys, 1992, 85).

2.1. The surfacing of action-theory

Several aspects contributing to the surfacing of action-theory can be found in the examples given: assumptions, surprise, stuckness... Expectations tend to become salient when they aren’t met, when the action undertaken doesn’t lead to the anticipated outcomes. Often such moments pass by without receiving much attention. As Sylvia Rhys (1992, 86) puts it: “Many of us as we move through life adjust some of our theories almost without realising it.” On the other hand the “process of giving up (elements of our action theory), particularly when it affects central values, can be compared to the mourning process.”

In an adventure program as well as in other contexts, the moments of surprise and stuckness where action-theory tends to surface may pass by without participants’ awareness. One way for facilitators to raise this awareness is to accentuate the interruptions such moments represent (Hovelynck, 1999, 13). They may do this by marking these moments in a variety of ways, ranging from a brief non-verbal intervention such as raising their eyebrows, frowning, a short “aha?” or “hey!”, to a question, an explicit interpretation, a confrontation, or a description of their feeling. Ultimately, the intention of their intervention is to direct participants’ attention inward, because their stuckness or surprise are viewed as a window to their action-theory.

In its most rudimentary form, the intervention comes down to a simple question: “What is happening?” The idea is to explore and express the participant’s assumptions during the “action present”, which is “the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation (Schön, 1982, 62). The facilitator, therefore, aims to intensify and focus an ongoing reflection-in-action. As assumptions are articulated in this interaction, or in further interaction among participants, alternative assumptions become salient and new action possibilities may arise. In this case the process is considered generative (Schön, 1993).

The basic tenets of the approach this paper proposes are described in this section. Interrupting people’s action with an invitation to look into what is happening doesn’t suffice to explore their action-theory, however. Sometimes the moments of stuckness or surprise turn out to be windows to mere “espoused theory” (Argyris, 1982, 85): rather than questioning their behaviour, the participants are now answering the facilitator’s question. The result – however well intended – is some form of justification of behaviour,
rather than experiential learning. The following paragraph therefore looks into the facilitators’ approach to accessing action-theory, and its underpinning theory.

2.2. Accessing action-theory

A key issue in this approach is that the dialogue among participants and between participants and facilitators explores action-theory, or theory-in-use, rather than espoused theory. Fundamentally, “espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories-in-use are those (...) consistent with what they do” (Argyris, Putnam & McLain-Smith, 1985, 82). Espoused theories and theories-in-use may or may not be consistent with each other. More specifically, Argyris (1982, 85) observes that “whenever (people) were dealing with non-programmed, difficult and threatening situations, they did not act congruently with their espoused theories.”

The interpretation of experiential learning proposed in the introduction then leads to two questions: how to access action-theory rather than mere espoused theory, and how to distinguish both kinds of theory? For the sake of clarity, this article to some extent treats both types of theory as if they were mutually exclusive: reality, however, is a little more complex.

Espoused theory

Consider the caving situation introduced above, where several participants “got stuck” in front of the narrow passage and were asked – by other participants or a facilitator – the basic question “what is happening?” A returning initial response to this question involved the notion of “claustrophobia”, and this response is worth looking into because it may expose some of the dynamics related to espoused theory. While the claustrophobia concept merely gives one’s fear of enclosed spaces a name, it is commonly offered and accepted as an explanation for behaviour: “I am afraid because I am claustrophobic.” This medical label seems to provide a quasi-generally accepted justification for the events. “If you are claustrophobic, we don’t expect you to continue.” As a result, further dialogue typically emphasises the possibility to return to the close-by exit rather than crawl through the passage ahead: “You don’t have to do this!”

By now this conversation reveals some returning indicators of espoused theorising. It presents general, abstract reflection, focused on outcome, and commonly leading to all-or-nothing terms: “claustrophobia”; “you go or you don’t”.

In psychology, attempts to have people express their action-theory are referred to as introspection and academics in this discipline have largely considered the validity of such self-reports to be highly questionable. Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson presented an interesting overview of studies to demonstrate this point of view: they conclude that when researchers ask their subjects about the antecedents of their behaviour, the answers present their respondents’ suitable “a priori causal theories” (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, 231). According to this view, the answer from the participant in the cave results from a primarily logico-deductive process based on his general theory on claustrophobia. His theorising could then be summarised along the following lines:

- “I am nervous;
- I am in a cave, in front of a narrow, enclosed passage;
- people who are nervous in such enclosed spaces are claustrophobic;
- therefore, I am claustrophobic.”

In other words: when people are asked for the principles underlying their action, they may give plausible and acceptable explanations rather than their actual action-theory.

Accessing action-theory

Interestingly, in their attempt to invalidate people’s answers to introspective questions, Nisbett and Wilson (1977, 246) formulate some conditions under which participants seem more likely to express their action-theory:

◊ “interrupting a process at the very moment it is occurring,
◊ alerting subjects to pay careful attention to their cognitive processes,
◊ coaching them in introspective procedures”.

Looking back at the above caving situation, it seems that only the first condition was met. The second condition was referred to earlier as “directing participants’ attention inward.” In the caving fragment, one of the indicators that this was not happening is the outcome orientation which characterised the conversation: the focus was on “are you going or not?” Nisbett and Wilson’s recommendation here comes down to supporting a “theory-orientation”, which is the term Bärbel Inhelder and Annette Kamiloff-Smith (1975, 209) used to describe people’s focus on the assumptions underlying their stuckness and which they too saw as a condition for learningii. Questions could then be: “What is going on that keeps you from continuing? What is happening that you don’t want to turn back?”

The third condition brings us back to the question of how to distinguish between action-theory and espoused theory. In this respect I noted that espoused theorising in the caving fragment was characterised by general and abstract reflection, commonly resulting in all-or-nothing terms. Coaching in introspective procedures implies guiding the reflection toward more differentiated interpretations of concrete and specific experiences. This may include refusing the general and abstract explanations which tend to cover up relevant reflection-in-action and as such represent a barrier to experiential learning.

In the further development of the caving fragment, facilitator intervention involved pointing out that the claustrophobia explanation was unlikely to offer any options besides ‘fighting’ or ‘flighting’, and refocusing the question. As mentioned earlier, further conversation lead to the following assumptions:

◊ “if I crawl into this hole, I may well come to a point which is too narrow for me to continue;
◊ as it is impossible to turn around in that hole, I’ll need to return backwards if I can’t continue;
◊ as it is difficult already to crawl in forward, I will certainly be unable to slide out backwards;
◊ if I can’t crawl out backwards, I will be stuck!”

Note that these assumptions, enacted in front of the narrow passage, are bodily felt meanings, not mere cognitive constructs. The propositional form of action-theory, which is prevalent in this article, doesn’t express that very well but “tacit knowing” (Polanyi, 1967) implies felt sense. It is important therefore to expand the traditional ‘theory’ concept to include bodily and socio-emotional knowing in order to understand what action-theory meansiii.

The relevance, or validity, of this action-theory was demonstrated by the breakthrough triggered by questioning it. More specifically, the facilitator questioned the assumption that one had to crawl in forward. The participant decided to crawl in backward, realising that this made the way in harder but ascertained that he would be able to crawl back out. Passing through the hole turned out not to be all that hard. This participant – on a basic level – developed an alternative action-theory and created new possibilities for action in doing so.

Focusing on idiosyncratic experiencing

In this caving fragment, first, a focus on the specifics of the event contributed to accessing action-theory and steering clear of mere espoused theory. Second, a focus on the particularity of this action-theory rather than the similarity of events was essential in generating relevant further options. As such the fragment illustrates the importance of an idiosyncratic perspective in exploring action-theory.

While most adventure educators will nod in agreement when it is stated that the specifics of participants’ experiences are of crucial importance in the facilitation of experiential learning, however, many of them also tend to help participants who hesitate to abseil – ‘acrophobia’? – over the cliff edge with a series of quasi-standard instructions. An equivalent of this approach in the above caving situation would consist of proposing any participant who shows signs of ‘claustrophobia’ to crawl in backward. In either case the facilitator acts on his or her recognition of events and fails to acknowledge the idiosyncrasy of the underlying action-theory.

The cases which are testimony to the idiosyncrasy of experiencing are abundant and several of them have been documented in the literature on adventure education (Greenaway, 1995; Mack, 1996, 25; Peeters, 1997, 43; Hovelynck, 1998, 9-10; 1999, 15). The implication that “there are no ‘ground rules’ (in implementing adventure therapy) other than to attend to the specifics of each situation” (Gass, 1993a, 145) has only received limited attention, however: appropriate program facilitation acknowledges the “non-predictability of experience” (Gilsdorf, 1998, 135) and attends to the idiosyncratic meaning participants read into the event. Facilitators’ preoccupation with the meanings that an outdoor activity – according to their own action-theory! – is supposed to have tends to distract them from indicators of their participants’ experiencing and may as such inhibit experiential learning rather than facilitate it. The approach to facilitation presented here is therefore based on marking such indicators as they occur. The assumption is that if these indicators refer to relevant action-theory and if participants are ready to explore this action-theory in the relational context of the program, they will open the window that was pointed out to them.

2.3. The action present as a frame for intervention

The emphasis this approach places on intervention during the action-present, raises questions about the role of ‘debriefings’ or ‘reviews’ because – as the words indicate – this program element is commonly considered to take place after the action. While this remains to some extent accurate, the trainers, educators and therapists in this approach view group meetings primarily as another context for ‘reflected action’. Instead of facilitating participants’ talking about earlier action, they will therefore mainly facilitate talking as present action, which means that the principles outlined in the caving fragment remain valid for facilitating debriefings (Peeters, 1997, 42).

The debriefing: reflecting as action

The first person to mention the events at the narrow passage during a later group meeting was not the young man who got stuck, but one of the group members who had passed before him. She told how the news that he was claustrophobic had reached the front of the line, waiting for everyone to regroup. No one had said much about it and when the “claustrophobic” showed up anyway, there were clear signs of relief.

In the conversation, several voices confirmed the group’s contentment that he had made it through the narrow passage. Someone wondered “what would have happened if he hadn’t conquered his fear?” Silence. One of the group members remarked that they hadn’t really addressed the issue when the message had reached them. Someone else answered that “it wouldn’t be appropriate to push people if they didn’t
want to do an activity, especially if someone was claustrophobic!” Another participant noted that “if we want to stay together as a group, and one of us doesn’t want to do it, we may need to ask for another activity.” While there was some support for this idea, a few group members pointed out that this option could severely restrict their options. One of them added that one of their conclusions the day before had been that they didn’t want to do initiatives all the time, and “it now started to sound like we’re about to exclude anything more serious too…”

Enacting assumptions similar to the ones underlying the initial conversation in front of the narrow passage, the group had obtained a comparable result: the conversation had quickly turned into a general, abstract reflection with a focus on outcome; it had lead to ‘go/no go’ options. The participants wanted to go beyond “the games in the garden” – as they called the initiatives – but their reflection lead to the dilemma expressed by the last speaker. A few group members repeated their positions, but the absence of new ideas confirmed their stuckness. Silence.

The silence was broken by a woman who looked at the young man and said: “You know, we were talking about you, but it suddenly strikes me that we haven’t even asked you: what was your experience?” The conversation took a different tone: rather than speaking to the entire circle, the participants increasingly turned to specific group members expressing how they had experienced specific events. It turned out that “the claustrophobic” in his account didn’t refer to claustrophobia, that he didn’t feel he had “conquered a fear” and that he had not felt pushed by the questions the facilitator had asked to him. Puzzled, someone wondered how their conversation had turned into “this big discussion about pushing people?”

Reviewing the caving activity thus lead to an exploration of the action-theory underlying the group’s communication. The participant whose stuckness in the cave had triggered the whole conversation, pointed out that he had sensed a similar transition during the debrief and in front of the narrow hole: he had felt tense and withdrawn during the initial part of the meeting and more relaxed after the woman had asked him for his experience. A few other group members stated they too had felt more involved after that moment. The facilitator, who had sat back during most of the debriefing, leaned forward: “Mhm!” For a while, the further conversation focused on the differences between the first and second half of their gathering.

Processing during the action present

When presented with the program fragments described in this article, facilitators commonly find that some of them are more relevant than others. Changing one’s action-theory about crawling through a passage in a cave is then so trivial that one may wonder why this program fragment was even presented. Why not, for example, explore the woman’s action-theory about her relationship with her parents instead? Wouldn’t that be more in line with what outdoor education and adventure therapy are all about? It appears that it would, indeed. Initially, however, the clarity and the triviality of the fragment seem to be two aspects of one characteristic: its short time frame.

To the extent the caving fragment relates to action-theory on crawling through a narrow passage, its relevance tends to be short-lived: the action present strictly covers the time the participant needed to crawl through the passage, or depending on what he considers his “unit of practice” (Schön, 1982, 62) it may stretch over the duration of the caving activity, and include other narrow passages. This limited time frame brings the enactment, the recognition and the renewal of the relevant action-theory together in a cycle short enough to clarify how they may be connected in a process of experiential learning. Not only is this short cycle easier to describe for me, as the author of this article, and hopefully easier to understand for you, as its reader; it was, in our fragment, also easier to grasp for the participant who lived it. Several

outdoor educators refer to this phenomenon as “immediate feedback” and present it as one of the advantages of outdoor activities for learning purposes.

The relevance of this feedback, however, is grounded in the fact that the event also touches on other action-theories with a more extended unit of practice. As the participant who got stuck in front of the narrow passage sensed and expressed during the debriefing, his experience also touched on action-theories about relating to other people. These weren’t explored in the context of the caving activity: they were re-enacted, recognised and changed during the debriefing. There, the participants discussed how – in both situations – their stuckness seemed related to their being “polite” and general rather than personal and specific: they had built an implicit norm which they had referred to as “respect”, but was now experienced as a form of disengagement...

As exemplified in this article, but not explicitly addressed in the group’s conversation, both the caving event and the group meeting also touched on assumptions about knowledge and learning: had the term ‘claustrophobia’ represented useful knowledge, had the principle that ‘one can’t push someone else’ been a meaningful guideline?

Relating to people and learning being life-long processes, the action present extends accordingly. This has two implications. First, it means that the related assumptions enacted in the outdoor activity may be re-enacted and surface again in a later debriefing. As a matter of fact, this seems likely to happen. Second, as the debriefing becomes part of the action present, it will be facilitated along the same principles as the activity. Concretely: rather than looking for a technique to guide the group to a more personal and specific communication style, the facilitator started the group meeting with an open question, and in doing so created the space for the group to enact its action-theory. In a first stage the group was “immersed” in the debriefing experience they created by enacting their assumptions (Hovelynck, 1998, 10). Eventually their action-theory surfaced in the group’s stuckness. While the facilitator was very aware of this, he decided to wait and see how the group members would cope. Some group members looked in his direction. Others seemed sunk in thought. When the woman turned to the young man, the action-theory underlying the group’s conversation was recognised and changed in-action.

While it may seem that the facilitator didn’t do much, this fragment also highlights some of his assumptions about facilitating experiential learning. One of them is that ‘debriefing’, rather than looking back on the caving activity, primarily means looking into the way participants enact their action-theory on dialogue and learning in the action present of the group meeting.

3. Theories on facilitating outdoor development programs

Whereas the second part of this paper has focused on the participants’ assumptions enacted during the program fragments, the third part addresses the facilitators’. Action-theories on facilitating learning in adventure education and therapy vary widely. Stephen Bacon (1987) described how they initially evolved through the history of Outward Bound, and distinguished three approaches which he called respectively “Let the Mountains Speak for Themselves”, “Outward Bound +” and the “Metaphoric Model”. His analysis was later refined through several publications (Gass, 1993b; Priest & Gass, 1993; Priest, 1994). A good overview can be found in Michael Gass’ book on “Adventure Therapy” (1995, 2-4): he presents “six generations of facilitation”, which can be traced back to the models Bacon introduced. The following overview reframes Bacon’s models in terms of the assumed relationship between action and reflection, and presents a fourth approach. While adopting Bacon’s historical perspective, I will avoid Bacon and Gass’ term “generations” because it holds an image which is too linear and because is has been loaded with connotations of how ‘advanced’ different approaches to facilitation are.
3.1. An action model

A first approach in both Bacon’s and Gass’ texts can be understood as an action model, in which the ‘instructor’ essentially proposes adventure activities which are assumed to contribute to the program’s development goal. He or she “generally relies on clients to extract the insight and learnings from the adventure experience” (Gass, 1993b, 221). As Bacon’s phrase “Let the Mountains Speak for Themselves” (1987, 6) suggests, there is little or no effort to make the significance of experience explicit, and its significance may even be assumed to be given in the events. Reflection remains implicit, and the instructor takes little or no responsibility for it.

3.2. An action-reflection model

Bacon describes how concerns about the transfer of learning led to a second approach, which can be understood as an action-reflection model: the activity is now followed by a debriefing, intended to foster an awareness of participants’ experiences and an exchange of its meaning to them. Bacon labels this approach “Outward Bound +” because it introduces an element which outdoor educators at the time were not familiar with, and for which they largely drew on the T-group tradition. Nowadays, expressing the significance of events seems to be widely accepted as a central feature of adventure education and therapy, thus differentiating it from outdoor recreation programs. While this expression of meaning mostly happens in conversation, it may also include non-verbal ways of symbolising the significance of experiences.

Within this model Gass distinguishes between “speaking for the experience” and “debriefing the experience”: the difference is in who interprets the events. In the first case the facilitator positions him- or herself as an expert, and “interprets the experience on behalf of the clients” (Gass, 1995, 2). In the latter, “clients are asked to reflect on their adventure experiences and discuss points of learning.” Their common characteristic is that the meaning of events is made explicit in a debriefing following the activity.

3.3. An introduction-action-reflection model

A third approach emphasises the “prebriefing” (Gass, 1995, 3), and can be understood as an introduction-action-reflection model. Bacon (1987, 13) described this approach as an attempt to raise participants’ awareness of the metaphoric nature of the event during the activity, rather than postponing this awareness until the post-activity debriefing.

Gass (1995) distinguishes three different approaches within this model, depending on the nature of the introduction. A first one is called “directly frontloading the experience”. Facilitators here focus participants on what is to be learned from the upcoming activity by highlighting specific objectives, which have been defined from a needs-assessment preceding the program.

The second approach, which is referred to as “framing the experience” corresponds to Bacon’s metaphoric model. The key concept in this model is “isomorphism”, or the structural equivalence between program activities and the reality of participants’ daily life (Bacon, 1987, 19; Gass, 1995, 4). The facilitator therefore introduces adventure activities in terms of the characteristics of participants’ home situation which seem relevant to the program objectives.

A third approach is referred to as “indirectly frontloading the experience” (Gass, 1995, 5) because it uses such techniques as double binds or symptom prescriptions to direct the learning in situations where non-deviating approaches don’t work.

The common characteristic of the introduction-action-reflection approaches is that meaning is expressed before the activity begins. The fact that a single example has been used to present “framing” (Bacon, 1987, 13) as well as “indirect frontloading” (Priest & Gass, 1994, 10) illustrates that the similarities

among the introduction-action-reflection approaches are more salient than the proposed differences. This has contributed to the ‘improper’ but fairly widespread use of the term ‘frontloading’ to refer to the introduction-action-reflection model in general.

I interpret the shift from action-reflection to an introduction-action-reflection model as a renewed search for holism. While experiential programs intended to approach people “as whole persons”, engaging them intellectually, emotionally and physically (Kolb, 1984, 31; Hobbs, 1992, xiv; Woolfe, 1992, 2; Luckman, 1996, 7; Gilsdorf, 1998, 137), the action-reflection approach treated action and reflection as separate and sequential. A meaningful introduction was seen as a way to re-integrate them, and have participants “perceive the metaphoric qualities of the experience as they pass through it” (Bacon, 1987, 13).

3.4. A reflection-in-action model

Whereas the prevalent North American evolution described by Bacon, Gass and Priest developed from action-reflection to introduction-action-reflection models, the Dutch language tradition in adventure education and therapy took a different approach to re-integrating action and reflection. This article presents the central aspects of this approach, which can be understood as a reflection-in-action model.

While characteristic of a local tradition, this approach is not an isolated one. The name “reflection-in-action” comes from Donald Schön (1982, ix) and the model’s central tenets can be traced to T-group work, action science and Gestalt as known in adult education (Brookfield, 1986, 233ff; Hobbs, 1992), in corporate consultancy (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and in experiential therapy (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993). In the field of outdoor programs, similar ideas have been expressed in Rüdiger Gilsdorf’s Gestalt-perspective (1998) and in Reldan Nadler and John Luckner’s ‘Edgework’ model (1992, 59; Nadler, 1995, 52).

While most of these contributions to adventure education refer to Gestalt notions, the action science tradition has largely remained unexplored in this field9. A reflection-in-action approach has been interpreted by some as an action model, because in the above presented North American evolution of “generations” that is the only option left if facilitation does not focus on processing experiences either after or before the activity. But unlike the “Let the Mountains Speak for Themselves” model, this approach doesn’t emphasise guiding the activity as much as facilitating the sense-making process enacted in it. It does highly value the expression of the meaning of events, and in this sense differs from an action model.

As reflection-in-action type programs commonly consist of a sequence of activities and ‘debriefings’, some have understood this approach as an action-reflection model. In an action-reflection model, however, the activity represents ‘doing’ and the debriefing represents ‘reflection’ and those two follow up on each other in a returning cycle. A reflection-in-action approach, in contrast, acknowledges that both the activity and the group meeting present ‘reflected action’. This implies that a debriefing isn’t primarily a reflection on earlier action but a continuation of the experiential process in a different task setting. As a consequence debriefings and activities are facilitated in similar ways: by marking surfacing events through questions, confrontations, interpretations, sharing emotions, or a variety of other interventions, and exploring the underlying action-theory from there. The words ‘de-briefing’ and ‘re-view’ may actually be inappropriate in this context because of their connotation of looking back, which is only a small part of what such a group meeting is about.

Occasionally the reflection-in-action approach was also interpreted as a metaphoric introduction model, because it has been presented in terms of metaphors (Hovelynck, 1995; 1998). But unlike in the metaphoric model, the facilitator in this approach is not concerned with isomorphism. The metaphor concept in this case does not refer to the “figures of speech” with which facilitators introduce an activity, and which intend to represent a structure of participants’ daily lives. Metaphors here refer to the “figures of speech” in which facilitators introduce an activity, and which intend to represent a structure of participants’ daily lives.

thought” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) by which the participants shape their reality in debriefings as well as adventure activities, and during as well as outside the program. A reflection-in-action approach is focused on participants’ recognition of these figures of thought and of the way they affect their possibilities for action.

4. Epilogue

This article has presented experiential learning as a process in which learners recognise and develop their action-theories and has proposed an approach to facilitating this process in adventure programs. Central aspects of this approach, which I characterised as a ‘reflection-in-action’ model, include intervening at surfacing moments – during conversation as well as other activities – and directing the dialogue toward idiosyncratic meaning by following indicators of specificity, concreteness and intensity or ‘aliveness’.

While the article outlines the basic tenets of this approach, it is limited in at least four respects. First, it presents action-theories mainly at an individual level. As the debriefing fragment may indicate, however, action-theories are also recognisable at the level of groups and larger systems (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Argyris, Putnam & McLain-Smith, 1985, 84ff), and these are explored and developed following the same action-principles (Hovelynck, 1998, 10-11).

Second, even with regard to so-called individual action-theories, group development is of crucial importance in a reflection-in-action approach. Beginning groups are mostly unable to address their members’ personal issues in generative ways and as groups progressively develop this ability, facilitators adjust their ways of marking surfacing moments accordingly. Whether such marking is followed by participants’ exploration of the assumptions underlying their action or by its justification with espoused theory largely depends on the relationships amongst group members and their relationship with the facilitators.

A third point concerns the centrality of the facilitator in recognising and exploring action-theories. This paper, because of its focus on facilitation, possibly masks the important role of the participants in marking and questioning each other’s surfacing assumptions. It will suffice to say that most facilitators in this approach – as illustrated by the debriefing fragment – tend to favour participants’ interventions over their own. Underlying this position is a concern for the continuation of learning after the program.

Finally, presenting action-theory in its propositional form – while it did contribute to a new perspective on the models of facilitation in our literature – may suggest that the implicit assumptions we enact in our behaviour are of a cognitive nature. More than the vocabulary presented in this article, the metaphoric view I presented elsewhere (1998, 1999) acknowledges knowing-in-action as embodied knowledge. In addition – as the pictures of the cave may suggest – the metaphorical concept acknowledges more clearly that any expression of action-theory is necessarily incomplete: it can never exhaustively articulate the enacted assumptions (Eraut, 1994; Hovelynck & Wittockx, 1996, 333).

In the wider range of facilitation models in the literature on adventure education, a reflection-in-action approach reconsiders the proposed relationship between action and reflection. Addressing the critique that the action-model falls short with regard to transfer of learning, the action-reflection model presents a markedly dualist approach to adventure programs in which facilitators, considering outdoor activities as ‘action’ and debriefings as ‘reflection’, treat action and reflection as separate and sequential. One way in which this dualism manifests itself is the clear difference in guidelines for facilitating action, during outdoor activities, and reflection, in debriefings. While the introduction-action-reflection model can be understood as an attempt to re-value sense-making-in-action (Bacon, 1987, 13; Gass, 1993b, 224), it largely adopts the concepts of action and reflection of the former ‘generation’. Guidelines for facilitating action and reflection remain different and are complemented with methods for frontloading or framing outdoor
activities. The result, in a sense, is a “preflection-action-reflection” model. In addition, the model’s emphasis on frontloading or framing tends to position the facilitator as the primary interpreter of participants’ actions, which brings in another form of dualism. In this context, a reflection-in-action model can be read as a more radical attempt to reintegrate action and reflection. It is based on the assumption that behaviour is reflected action and attends to the reflection that participants enact moment-by-moment, in an ongoing process which is not bound by the program structure of outdoor activities and debriefings.

References


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1 Note that participants occasionally mention ‘claustrophobia’ on the medical form they fill out before the program starts. This example also highlights possible side-effects of a narrow interpretation of the “challenge by choice” principle (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988, 131).

2 In the literature on adventure education, the same recommendation has also been formulated in terms of a “process-orientation” versus a “result-focus” (Gilsdorf, 1998, 135).

3 Greenberg, Rice and Elliot (1993, 3, 82), in their study of experiential therapy, similarly develop the Piagetian concept “cognitive schemes” to “emotional schemes”.

4 In the field of adventure education, action science has been presented mainly as a promising approach to researching experiential education (Kolb, 1991; 1992). Its relevance for the facilitation of experiential learning has been discussed to some extent in Richard Flor’s comparison between ‘organisational development’ and adventure programs (1991) and in an article by Herman Wittockx and myself presenting outdoor training as a form of ‘appreciative action research’ (1996).

5 This model is firmly rooted in an interpretation David Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984, 21) as a sequence of four stages and neglects the continuous dialectical tension between the so-called stages (Kolb, 1884, 40-42). Such a
sequential reading of the learning cycle generates approaches which treat the outdoor-activity as a means of data-gathering and the debriefings as data-analysis (see for example Pfeiffer & Jones, 1980, 3-6).

vi Heidi Mack’s feminist critique that the introduction-action-reflection approach builds on an “imposed metaphoric construct” (1996, 26ff) can be understood in this perspective, as can my own plead to re-emphasise participants’ metaphors (1998; 1999). In this respect, Gass’ (1997, 66) reply that the learning in adventure programs unavoidably is a co-creation doesn’t rule out his earlier point (1995, 2) that there is significant difference between “speaking for the experience” and facilitating participants’ interpretation of events. It seems that a critical question with regard to introduction-action-reflection models concerns the relationship between ‘speaking before the experience’ and ‘speaking for the experience’ (Hovelynck, 1999, 19).