Moving active learning forward:
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‘Active’ and ‘experiential’: living apart together?
Thank you for the invitation to share some thoughts on the theme of this conference – ‘moving active learning forward’. It seems a particularly well chosen theme: one of my colleagues at the Leuven University calls experiential education “the most important social invention of the last century”, and it is my impression that the words ‘active’ and ‘active learning’ capture a central issue in the current development of that educational innovation. In this presentation, I express some of my impressions, hopes and concerns in this regard. I will start with a story, then present a perspective on the learning process that this story presents, and finally suggest some implications for facilitation. Looking at facilitation, I will address some issues concerning the developing standards of professionalism in our field.

An episode of learning: Eric’s story
As a starting point for this inquiry into active learning, I present the story of Eric. It took place several years ago, and I admit that some of the details have faded. At the time, Eric was 19 years old, a college student, the oldest son in a family of 3, and trying to free himself from his drug addiction. As part of this effort, he registered on a 18-day, open-enrollment wilderness program, led by a colleague and myself. I met Eric on day 1 of that program, along with 10 others participants, young men and women of about Eric’s age.

This is Eric a few days later. The group did a long hike that day, carrying fairly heavy backpacks, then cooked and pitched camp for the night. Eric hiked for the day, then... collapsed on his backpack and let the others deal with food and shelter. After dinner, Mary, who had done a lot of the cooking, told him that he disappointed her. She had been tired also, but with three days of hiking still ahead of them continued her effort in order for all of them to get a good night's rest. Eric didn't say much: he saw her point.

The next morning after breakfast, my colleague and I proposed the destination for that day: “The goal is to reach this saddle and...” – picking up on the conversation of the evening before – “to prepare a good meal.” Off we went. That day, Eric hiked to the saddle, helped cooking and then... collapsed – while the others pitched camp. The others frowned, sighed, grinned, but did not say anything. Neither did my colleague and I.

We presented the goal for the next day as "reach the ridge, prepare a meal and set up camp." Eric finished the hike, did his part of the cooking and helped setting up camp. While less straightforward in the program, where many other events happened beside the story of Eric that I present here, a pattern emerged: Eric appeared to achieve his goals, but once he reached them, tended to collapse.

The last day of hiking led to the foot of a rock site, where we would spend a day climbing. During that day, Eric and I walked part of the trail together and talked, as we had also done

the days before. Only this time, Eric told about what he called ‘his single big project’: making it without drugs to the fourth of November, the first anniversary of his drug-free life. He looked forward to the achievement this would be! I remember asking whether he was going to make it, and his answer, in a quite deliberate voice: “Think so.” Silence. “What’s after the anniversary?” Eric looked at me: he did not know, but he had recognized the pattern. He knew I had. He figured that Mary had, and a few others. He needed to set a new goal before he reached this one. That evening, Eric helped cooking and took the initiative to set up camp. Mary was the first to give him a hand.

As mentioned, the next day was a climbing day. For some, it was a matter of reaching the top. For one participant, climbing was a matter of balance. For Eric, it was about continuously setting goals, searching for the next handhold before letting go of this one, thinking a few moves ahead – quite a number of moves when the route was hard.

In November, about 4 months later, I received an anniversary card: “1 year and 2 days completely drug-free”, it read. Frankly, except for receiving a card, I hadn’t expected anything else. I had more questions about the year to come. However, there was one sentence that gave me confidence: “You know what? I don’t feel much different than I did 3 days ago. I still feel good.” That obviously had not always been the case.

One year later, I received a second anniversary card. I haven’t heard from Eric since...

**A perspective on learning or a romance with activities?**

This story presents an episode of learning that is ‘active’ in two very different perspectives that I would like to put in contrast today. On the one hand, the learning in this story is ‘active’ in the sense of ‘physically active’. Eric participates in several ‘activities’: hiking, climbing, camping, and also canoeing, a ropes course... This is the kind of ‘active’ that participants most readily talk about when asked about their program: it is relatively concrete and easy to put in words. For the same reasons, this is the kind of ‘active’ that is easiest to market, most tangible in program management, most salient in program evaluation, yet... *not essential* for experiential learning.

On the other hand, the learning in this story is also ‘active’ in a sense that is *crucial* in experiential learning, but proves difficult to sell, remains intangible in program design and is hard to research. That is: Eric is the ‘actor’ of his learning process. Earlier in this conference, Bob Stremba referred to this as ‘ownership’, and Michael Gass, in his Kurt Hahn address, called it ‘self-authoring’. Connecting with the conference theme, I will call it ‘actorship’. It means that Eric sets his own learning agenda: he decides what to learn about, and how to approach that. He is the one to evaluate his learning (see e.g. Woolfe, 1992, 1). Of course, Eric does not make these decisions in a vacuum: his experience is embedded in his interactions with his family, his friends, the other participants and – last but not least – with my colleague and I as facilitators. But ultimately, the reference point in Eric’s learning is... Eric’s experience (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993, 21).

‘The reference point in experiential learning is the learners’ experience’: it sounds obvious, doesn’t it? Yet it doesn’t seem to be. For understandable reasons: in terms of innovation, experiential education involves a radical change in learning concept. For centuries, the decisive reference point in education has not been the learners’, but the teachers’ experience. To illustrate the significance of this shift, I’d like to introduce you to a few words of Dutch – which remains the language that I think in most often. In Dutch, we have two
common words for ‘teacher’. One of those is ‘leerkracht’, which literally means ‘learn-power’ or ‘learn-drive’, and the other is ‘leraar’, which is closest to ‘learner’, but does refer to the teacher. These words reflect how deep-seated the assumption is that the source, the ‘locus’ of learning is the teacher. Experiential education turns this reference frame inside-out: it takes the learners’ experience as a reference point (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993; Hovelynck, 1998) and in doing so the “locus of control is shifted away from the teacher in the direction of the learner” (Woolfe, 1992, 1).

While this shift is at the heart of the educational innovation that our field represents, our practices with regard to this shift vary widely. When I look at brochures, web sites, read our literature and visit programs, I have the impression that ‘experiential’ education sometimes loses its focus on participants’ ‘actorship’ in the learning process in favor of a romance with activities. Whether that means outdoor activities, such as in Eric’s story, or drama, dance, urban activities, service projects… does not really matter: Eric could have learned what he did in any of those. What does matter to me is that the space for the learners’ experience in these activities remains a central reference point. That experiential education does not become a field of active teaching – no matter how valuable that may be – but moves active learning forward. I believe that our success in this regard will depend on our ability to let go of our preoccupation with activities and to leave behind the didactic stance, which is so deeply ingrained in Western education (Hovelynck, 2001a).

Experiential education: moving beyond a didactic stance

I understand that the word ‘didactic’ is not commonly used in the United States. Webster (1981) defines "didactics" as the study of “systematic instruction” and “didactic” as “intended to convey instruction and information.” If experiential education is to be an alternative to didactic approaches to learning (see e.g. Wildemeersch et al, 1998; Hobbs, 1992), how does it view learning? If learning is no longer a matter of teachers defining desired learning outcomes and then conveying the necessary information, what is it? I will propose that experiential learning consists of three sub-processes, which I will refer to as ‘recognizing’, ‘acknowledging’ and ‘reconnoitring’ (Hovelynck, 2001b).

Eric’s story illustrates these processes of knowing or learning: during the hike, he recognizes a pattern in the events, he acknowledges his own active role in making the events what they are, and he reconnoitres – or explores – possible alternatives.

Experiencing: living co-created events

A hike is not just a hike: it is what people turn it into. By adjusting the straps of their backpack so it sits as comfortable as possible, for example, or by neglecting to do so and live with whatever way the pack pulls; by making decisions about the route together or by looking at the map by themselves and expecting everyone to follow, and by bearing the consequences of whatever approach they adopt in that regard; by appreciating the environment or by counting their steps until they finally arrived. An activity becomes what

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1 The reason to translate this third concept as ‘reconnoitring’ rather than the more common ‘exploring’, is that the former – with the same root as ‘cognition’ – better expresses that this process is a mode of knowing, and hence that learning and knowing are essentially the same in this context (see e.g. Kolb, 1984, 105; Wenger, 1998, 95).
people turn it into by bringing in a reference frame that they developed through earlier experience.

Allow me to present another Dutch word to you – we may not have a good term for ‘learner’, but we do have a few interesting synonyms for ‘experiencing’. One of those is ‘meemaken’, in which you will recognize the root ‘make’. ‘Mee-maken’ literally means ‘co-making’. Translating it to English as ‘co-constructing’, as academics sometimes do, tends to open an epistemological debate, a discussion on the nature of valid knowledge. But in Dutch, ‘meemaken’ is the intrinsic nature of experiencing. When we use this common word to say that we experienced something, we literally say: “I have co-constructed something. Along with the others involved, I have ‘made’ the events into what they ended up being.”

In Eric’s story, when my colleague and I propose a destination for the day’s hike, Eric somehow makes that activity into a ‘single big project’. Over the next few days, he experiences how this ‘construction’ of the activity leads to his collapse as soon as the ‘single project’ is accomplished, leads to Mary’s frustration, to his own embarrassment, and so on. Eric is discovering the way in which he makes his day, so to speak.

**Learning: recognizing, acknowledging and reconnoitering**

An initial element in this discovery is ‘recognition’: Eric realizes that the events that occur when the group reaches its camp site or, the next day, finishes cooking, are in some respect typical. He has experienced this before... There is a pattern, something related to goal-setting, a theme, which Eric also recognizes in his effort to rid himself of drugs.

An important part in how Eric recognizes this theme is frustration: his group mates are frustrated with him not helping out, Eric is frustrated by Mary’s saying so the first day and frustrated by no-one saying anything the day afterwards... Maybe ‘frustration’ is not the best possible term, but it is not very pleasant anyway, and chances are that it will repeat itself when he reaches his ‘one year without drugs’ goal.

In terms of learning, Eric’s ‘recognition’ plays an important role in setting a learning agenda and frustration, one, helps making the pattern more visible and, two, generates the energy for change. It creates a need.

A second process of learning, I translated as ‘acknowledging’: Eric becomes aware of his own share in these events. Psychologists refer to this as ‘internal attribution’, but ‘acknowledging’ is more than that: it is not only ‘in the mind’, it is expressed in the interaction with the other people involved. Eric’s story illustrates this. At first, when Mary voices her frustration, it remains unclear what Eric attributes the events to. Maybe he blames what happened on the nature of hiking, on the unreasonable targets set by the staff, or on Mary being difficult, for example. But during the last day of hiking, Eric acknowledges that he is, at least to some extent, the ‘maker’ of the events that he further experiences and he makes a change. He takes the initiative to pitch camp. He becomes an actor, rather than an observer of patterns.

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2 Dyer (1994, 40) refers to this as 'owning up', a concept that integrates what is called 'internal attribution' in psychology and 'I-statements' in training and development.
The third process is ‘reconnoitring’. It is the most open-ended process and hence hardest to describe, but reconnoitring is somehow unavoidable once learners acknowledge their active role in the – at times frustrating – course of events. Put simply, Eric had the option of exploring alternative ways of setting and reaching goals or repeating his cycle of setting and reaching single goals, collapsing, being frustrated and being more acutely aware of it – which is a change also. That night, Eric took the initiative to set up shelter, and the course of events changed: Mary supported rather than confronted him. The next day, Eric experimented with goal-setting in terms of hand- and footholds on the rocks: mostly a matter of not getting stuck in a position because he hadn’t considered the next move. His experiment enabled him to reach the top.

Four months later, the sentence on his anniversary card suggested that Eric was still exploring the goal-setting theme: “You know what? I reached my goal, but I am still going for it.”

Implications for facilitation

Finally, what does this perspective on experiencing and learning mean for experiential education? Or, in other words, what conditions facilitate this process of ‘active’ experiential learning? Eric’s story allows me to highlight some of the conditions that contributed to his learning. I will loosely connect these conditions to the three processes which I proposed constitute active learning:

- ‘Recognizing’ relevant themes and patterns appears to be facilitated by an open learning space and by allowing a certain level of frustration.
- ‘Acknowledging’ one’s own share in the events seems to be facilitated by a specific interpretation of ‘challenge by choice’.
- ‘Reconnoitring’ seems to be supported by an eye for “small o’s” rather than a focus on “Big O’s”, as process researchers have respectively called small, intermediate learning outcomes versus final program outcomes.

While presenting these facilitating conditions, I will take the opportunity to express some concerns about the so-called professionalization of our field and some of the practices that I hear recommended in this regard.

Providing an open learning space

In order to learn what he learned, Eric first and foremost needed space. Ray Woolfe (1992, 4) uses the terms “freedom within structure” and space for participants’ “self-expression”, not only in words but also in their approach to the activity. Space to turn the activity into their experience, which for Eric – apparently – meant space to turn the day’s hike into a ‘single big project’: it is only insofar he received the space to display this theme, that he could recognize it and develop his focus for further learning.

Of course, there are limits to the space for learning: ethical, legal, logistical and also others, such as relational safety (see e.g. Edmondson, 1999), more directly related to the learning process itself. Groups cannot deal with endless openness. Yet it is my impression that participants’ space for self-organization and self-directed learning in our field is under increasing pressure.
This evolution has several sources, among which the focus on activities and the didactic mind-set that I mentioned earlier (see e.g. Brown, 2002). The following quote from an adventure educator illustrates what I mean:

"I like multi-activity programs a lot. In a canoeing-only program, for example, once the students master the necessary skills, the program becomes slow and long for me... But in a multi-activity program, by the time the students become skilled in the first activity we move on to another one, and then I can instruct something new."

I suspect that Eric would not have many chances to collapse on his backpack with this approach, simply because the amount of instruction and the daily assignment of duties, meant to keep things running smoothly, would drastically reduce the group’s space for self-organization, and hence Eric’s space for turning the hike into a ‘single big project’. The man quoted is a nice person and an excellent ‘instructor’, but as an experiential educator, his focus on activities and his didactic mind-set considerably reduce his participants’ space for experiential learning, in the sense outlined above. By being unable to cope with his feelings of becoming redundant, “he keeps his students dependent” on him (Woolfe, 1992, 6), rather than encourage their actorship.

Unfortunately, conventional standards of ‘professionalism’ often confirm educators in their tendency to control program events rather than encourage participants’ actorship. Accreditation programs, for example, especially safety audits, tend to value the predictability of strictly followed schedules more than the uncertainties of “organic program design” (Barron, 1996), regardless of the fact that the latter may be more appropriate in the light of participants’ emergent experiences.

**Developing a learning agenda**

A particular aspect of providing an open learning space concerns the development of a learning agenda. Eric’s story is interesting in this regard, as he attended the program with an obvious sense of purpose – more so than most participants in open-enrollment programs. His aspiration to remain drug-free for one year was what is currently called ‘s.m.a.r.t.’ – specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused and timely. Note however that, even then, his goal for the program did not meet the ‘s.m.a.r.t.’ criteria in the least: Eric had no more than a vague expectation that participating in an adventure program could support his effort to get rid of drugs. How, he did not know: his goal ‘emerged’ as the events unrolled.

It happens that ‘s.m.a.r.t.’ objectives are presented as a characteristic of professionalism in program facilitation. I propose that this is a side-track: experiential learning doesn’t work that way (see e.g. Wenger, 1998, 154). With the words of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991, 97), ‘s.m.a.r.t.’ objectives are part of the “teaching curriculum”, not the “learning curriculum”. The latter is shaped by evolving expectations, opportunities and contributions, more than pre-defined objectives – or if I can use the image that Reb Gregg presented during the Awards Ceremony: learning follows “the meandering trail of the child in the snow”, not “the straight track of the grandfather”.

**Permission for frustration**

Another point concerns the role of frustration in learning. It appears that frustration represents an important opportunity in the ‘learning curriculum’ just mentioned (Hovelynck,
Eric’s case seems typical rather than exceptional in this regard: his own and his group mates’ frustration played an important role in recognizing a relevant pattern and in developing his learning agenda. Yet I have the impression that there is a growing emphasis on keeping participants happy, on ‘having fun’ – sometimes to the point of ruling out so-called ‘negative’ emotions.

At least two developments seem to contribute to the desire to keep participants happy throughout the program. The first one is the increasingly short duration of programs, often 1 or even ½ day. In this context, even if providers are willing to put up with frustrated participants, they’re not necessarily ready to let them leave the program frustrated, as that is bad publicity. The second trend, reinforcing the first one, concerns the requirement that programs be evaluated on a few rating scales. Again, this seems to be thought of as part of professionalism and while the after-program questionnaires start to be known as ‘happy sheets’, these quantitative evaluations remain a rarely questioned form of quality management.

**Challenge by choice**

Except for suggesting conditions for learning, the last few points raise the question to what extent certain aspects of ‘professionalism’ contribute to participants’ learning, or maybe even interfere with it. The notion of ‘challenge by choice’, which I coupled to the process of ‘acknowledging’, seems a good example in this regard.

Today, it seems that ‘challenge by choice’ primarily refers to the principle that participants have the right to not partake in a program activity. Standards of professionalism require us to make participants aware of this ahead of time, preferably at several moments in the program, and documented – just in case. In many programs, it has become a safety procedure: it is people’s right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wish.

In Eric’s story, ‘challenge by choice’ means something entirely different – in my understanding closer to what the term originally stood for (Schoel et al., 1998, 131). It refers to participants’ right – and responsibility – to set their own learning agenda. It means that I “regard the individual (..) as an active (..) participant in the process of defining and putting into practice educational agendas and methodologies” (Woolfe, 1992, 1), and that he or she has the final say in this. And, of course, this implies that if Eric or anybody else does not want to join in an activity, they have the right to refuse it. But their right to refuse participation is not the core of ‘challenge by choice’: it is a mere by-product of my interest and involvement in their perspectives and purposes.

**Professionalism**

It seems to me that the development of our understanding of ‘challenge by choice’ to some extent illustrates the dynamics of so-called professionalism. The concept’s original meaning in terms of active learning gave way to an interpretation in terms of (the right not to partake in) program activities. In the same vein, its focus on the subtle complexities of the learning process was downplayed in favor of a simple procedure. While my presentation may somewhat magnify it for the sake of clarity, this change does raise questions about the development of the educational innovation that our field represents. If we want to continue and foster that innovation, we cannot simply adopt standards of professionalism from
believe-systems in which ‘reliability’ equals ‘predictability’, or in which ‘quality’ is judged by procedures. Because the richness of experiencing is not predictable (see e.g. Greenaway, 1995), because the quality of the relationships required for personal learning cannot be captured in procedures, and because experiencing and learning are the core of our profession.

**Big O’s and small o’s**

The last point that I want to address, is that facilitation requires attention to small changes rather than a focus on ‘the Big O’, as some researchers call the myth of the final program outcome (Greenberg & Pinsof, 1986, 7). I presented Eric’s story as a learning episode worth looking into to identify conditions that contribute to learning. Note, however, that some outcome research may claim that Eric did not learn anything: he was drug-free for several months before the course, and he remained drug-free after. No change in the measured variable, ‘the Big O’, hence no learning.

I believe that Eric did learn. When he took the initiative to build the group’s shelter for the night, that was new behavior. The way in which he climbed, connecting moves rather than going for single steps or separate sections, involved new behavior. And if Eric didn’t feel much different 2 days after completing his big project than 1 day before it, that represented a significant change. Such indicators, or ‘small outcomes’, are the material that facilitators work with.

Research that documents program outcomes is important for funding. But ‘moving active learning forward’ is not a matter of funding only, and at least two points deserve our attention when conducting research. It seems important, first, to not limit participants’ actorship in their learning for the sake of research methodology and, second, to design methods that are sensitive to changes underneath the level of ‘s.m.a.r.t.’ objectives or ‘Big O’s’, because that is where the learning process takes place. It is not my intention to focus this address on research issues: I hope that the following quotes clarify the potential role of research in moving active learning forward – or backward.

“Studies that view experiential programs like a medical ‘treatment’ ignore the learner’s role and make her or him a passive recipient of program delivery” (DeLay, 1996, 77).

“To describe a situation ‘objectively’ in psychology actually means to describe the situation as a totality of those facts and only those facts which make up the field of that individual. To substitute for that world of the individual the world of the teacher (...) or of anybody else is to be not objective, but wrong” (Lewin, 1952, 62).

To support the innovation that experiential education represents, it seems important that the concerns articulated in these quotes at least be weighed against the convenience of established data-gathering methods (see e.g. Warner, 1986, 249).

**Concluding thoughts**

There is more to be said about Eric’s story, both with regard to learning and facilitating this process, and in what I did say more nuances are needed. Yet further elaboration would not alter the line of thought that I presented.

In essence, I proposed that *moving active learning forward*, first, calls for a focus on learners’ actorship rather than on program activities and, second, requires a clear distinction between active learning and active teaching. Including activities in teaching may cheer up students’ school lives, which is worthwhile yet by no means sustains the innovation that our field stands for. Experiential education – as the last quote from Lewin testifies – offers an alternative to didactic approaches, not a more attractive form of it. It is not about developing livelier ways to pass on teachers’ blueprints of reality to students, but about facilitating the learners’ process of developing their own blueprints. In addition, I proposed that it is about facilitating learners’ awareness of how their blueprint generates a reality as well as reflects one. Because experiencing is ‘mee-maken’: it involves, by bringing former experience to the ‘activities’, co-creating the events that are further experienced.

In this light, I shared my concern about a trend toward programs where “the trainers carefully design learning situations within which the trainees then, by ‘discovering themselves’, learn exactly that for which the sessions were set up” (Oomkes, 1992, 92) and I questioned standards of ‘professionalism’ – rooted in a didactic and procedural logic – which tend to encourage this development. In addition, I pointed out that the same concerns apply to the research in our field: it will not contribute to active learning as long as “experiential educators have fought bitterly against traditional educational principles in the past only to accept similar standards as basic research principles” (Warner, 1986, 249).

Finally, I presented a perspective on learning processes that steers clear of didactic conceptions. Presenting it through Eric’s story hopefully clarifies that this is not unreal theory, but an expression of practice. And if it is happening, why doubt that a non-didactic education is possible?

**Special thanks**

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**Literature**


Table 1: 3 sub-processes of experiential learning

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