



International Academy of Experiential Education

## **Role of experiential learning trainer/facilitator** (or everything that I have been writing about it collected in one document, and inspired by via Experientia to do so!)

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### ***Context of experiential learning***

Before we go to the role of the trainer, I want to present my understanding of the context of experiential learning in the field of learning generally.

According to Buddhist psychology<sup>1</sup>, there are three kinds of learning: received knowledge, intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge.

**Received knowledge** (sometimes translated as “heard knowledge”) is when we learn by listening to others, read books or get information from any other sources that we respect and we accept information as truth, because we just trust the source of knowledge. It creates a kind of “borrowed wisdom”.

**Intellectual knowledge** is when after reading or hearing a certain teaching we review it critically and if it fits in our own logic and if it satisfies our intellectual understanding, we accept it. But still it doesn’t strengthen our own wisdom. It is digested, but still remains borrowed wisdom.

**Experiential knowledge** is the knowledge which arises out of our own experience, out of our own realization of truth and leads to our own wisdom, the wisdom by which one lives, real wisdom that will bring a change in our lives. Because experience changes the nature of our minds and it leads to a real change of our behaviour.

Of course in learning about the world of objects, about the material side of life experiential knowledge is not always necessary or even needed, but when it comes to the subjective side of human nature, when we try to realize the real nature of ourselves, our interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomenon, the knowledge that comes from experience is essential and necessary.

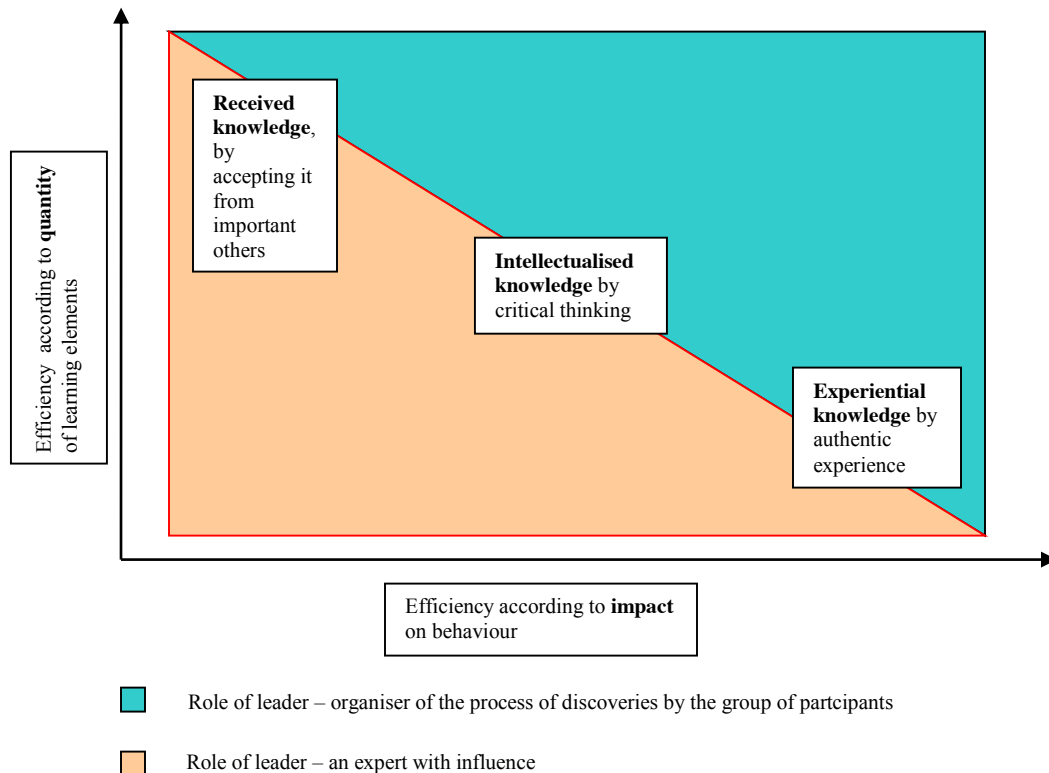
**Conclusion for our practice as trainers:** if our aim is to increase the quantity of information about the world of objects (natural sciences) we better organize lectures and pass information in as many efficient ways as possible. But if our aim is to facilitate the changing of human behaviour, we should go experiential. We should respect the

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<sup>1</sup> “An introduction to Buddhist psychology”, Padmasiri da Silva. “The art of living” William Hart

subjective nature of human beings (human sciences) and respect the fact that personal discovery is essential and necessary for real change in human beings.

**Table 1. Three kinds of learning**

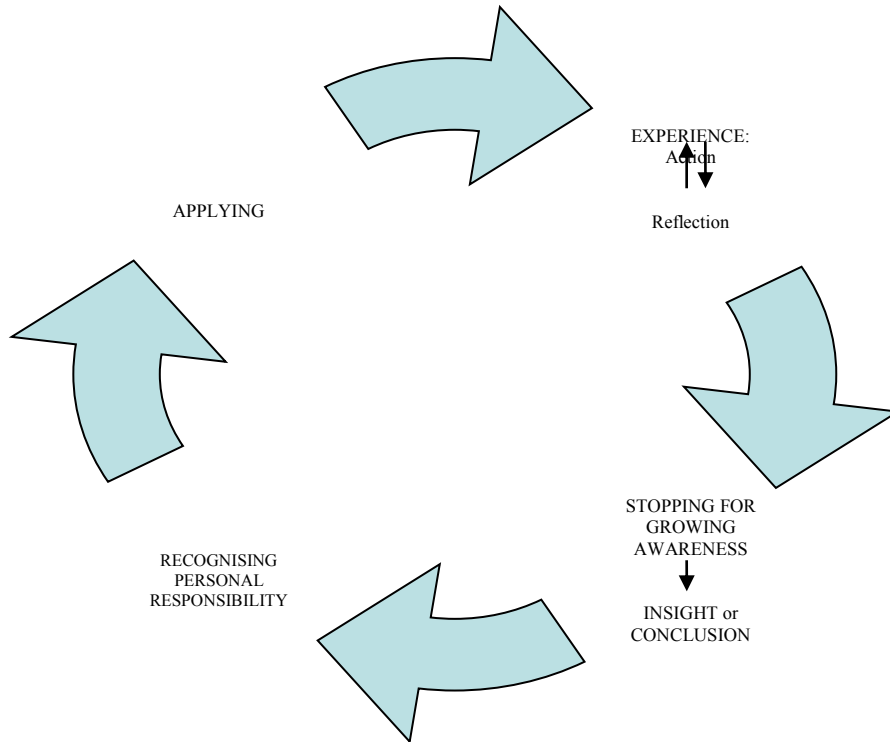


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Understanding of this context leads us directly to an understanding of the role of the trainer in learning and specifically in experiential learning. Generally speaking, in experiential learning we have much more responsibility for organising the process of discoveries of trainees than providing expertise on a particular topic or being very active and visible in telling trainees what their learning points and learning targets should be. To back this up, I like to quote my colleague Björn Vilhjálmsson: "they (our participants) remember not what we say, but what they remember about what they said themselves and - logically - they follow not what we understand about them, but what they understand about themselves". So clearly this is completely different from, may even be opposite to the kind of responsibility one would expect from a trainer who has to provide knowledge as information. In order to carry out our role well, I would say that this understanding should be shared by both trainers and by the specific group of participants with which they are working.

## ***The Role of the trainer in the process of experiential learning***

For explaining the role of the trainer/facilitator in experiential learning processes we like the old and good Kolb circle, but we look at it a bit differently.



As can be seen from the diagram, there are at least two main parts of experience: action and reflection. Those are two acts in what we like to call 'the inner journey'. The journey should be leading the participant to growing clarity about their inner reality as it is. Not created reality, not provoked reality, not established reality, but their inner reality as it is. Sometimes it can be pleasant, sometimes uncomfortable, but the aim of activities and reflections is to experience this inner reality as clearly and as fully as possible.

This growing clarity leads us to a GROWING AWARENESS and finally to INSIGHT in some facts about the way we behave or the way we react with our:

- (a) thoughts/interpretations,
- (b) feelings,
- (c) actions.

The result of it is usually a moment of recognition: "this is how it is". It is like an unstoppable flow of clarity. Usually it is followed with more or less intense emotions, sometimes negative, sometimes with a feeling of relief. Of course, sometimes the process of growing awareness is not deep enough, not long enough, and without enough quality to lead to proper insights. Then there is just the time to conclude from "what we have". A more rational mind is involved. And the rational, logical mind can be right or can be left (wrong). But it is still better than nothing!

Recognizing the facts about our inner reality leads us to the necessary step to also RECOGNISE THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR "ME CHANGE": what is because of me, what is not because of me, what do I want/can change, what I want/should accept? For example, on the high rope I always experience very great tension when leaving the safe ground and it takes an enormous amount of time for me to do it. After several experiences like this it becomes clearer and clearer to me that all of this is not just about the exercise and maybe it is not even about the exercise at all – it is about me. The growing awareness leads me to the insight – “shit! I do this all the time when leaving my safe cocoon!” But the insight is not enough. Life is full of “high rope” situations. What is my choice – to avoid those situations as much as I can or to try to face some, to accept changes even if I don’t know all the consequences of such change? And only this leads to the applying of recognized responsibility.

Every step in the process is related to specific responsibilities of the trainer or facilitator of the process. The usual position of experienced trainers would be that “it is impossible to frame it all in to fixed step-by-step procedures”. But sometimes I see trainers who just start doing their own work and they don’t buy this argument – almost like a negation of responsibility. They say “but what should I do exactly?” So, I tried to reflect on my own practice and then to structure how I work usually and what I try to have in mind or I think it would be good to have in mind. Maybe it can be helpful. Or not. (If not... then you can try to do your own table!)

<i>Step in the process</i>	<i>Role of the trainer</i>
Before Action	Clarifying the roles of trainer and trainee in the learning process
Action	<p>To organize experience or just to give a task. The task should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- have no hidden agenda (no hidden teaching message or no specific pre-planned emotions)</li> <li>- preferably include a chance for discussing the agreed topic or the issue of the group; for example if the issue for the group is decision-making, it is good to have a task where decision-making is involved; but... sometimes the topic is not really clear and the issue is not obvious yet and then I say let’s take any exercise and anyway sooner or later the real topic and the real issue will come up – you just have to be careful to notice it when it appears!</li> <li>- have a proper level of challenge; I as the trainer should try to be aware about what is the challenge for <b>this</b> group at <b>this</b> moment, what is the content of the challenge, what is the level of challenge? after questioning myself about it, after maybe consulting with the group I should just follow my intuition.</li> </ul>

<p>Reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To ask the best question. But, "what is the best question?" you might ask. I don't know. Maybe the one which leads to "here and now": how are you before starting the exercise? What is going on within you now (during exercise)? What are your emotions and thoughts after the exercise?</li> <li>- To say what I see (specific behaviour, specific phrase, non-verbal expression) and to ask what is it/does it mean? It helps especially when working for participants who are at the edge of their comfort zone. Noticing their reactions (verbal, non-verbal...) helps to become aware about the edge moment and to achieve break-through. All group counselling techniques can be helpful for this process: mirroring, generalizing, sharing our own emotions (when surprised, when confused etc.)</li> <li>- To ask questions about the chosen challenge: when was the decision-making moment for you (when the challenge is decision-making)? How was it for you?</li> <li>- To observe and work with distortion: to notice too much laughter or too much talk, or loud speech or anything that looks strange for us; but we don't put too much emphasis on it; we let people be as they are and they sooner or later will realise what is important and to react themselves. It is better to use the resource of the group for work with distortions. It is good to use the phenomenon known as "The group is laughing". The group will notice "what is strange". The group will laugh, or will ignore or do something else. It seems to be a strange reaction of the group to the equally strange behaviour or distortion of the person. There are a lot of theories in psychology to explain it: where it comes from and what it means. I don't want and I am not able to put it all in this table. But I strongly recommend reading psychological books about personality theories, about subconscious or unconscious behaviour of us all.</li> </ul>
<p>Stopping for growing awareness that leads to insight or concluding</p>	<p>Of course the best thing is when awareness attacks us without leaving us the choice to accept the insight or not. Here, the meaning of experience is so clear that we can just laugh or (more often) cry. But sometimes the picture is unclear and ... the programme is over. I strongly believe that in any case our responsibility is to provide a space for participants to have pause for thought and to try to verbalise what does this experience mean to them. Emotional support and safety is very important for this. Support and safety</p>

	<p>which allows noticing both pleasant and unpleasant colours of the picture.</p> <p>Drawing exercises, different models of self-reflection, and solo time can be very helpful at this stage of the program.</p>
Taking responsibility	<p>When the picture is named (more or less) it becomes clearer what is about me and it is important to consider, what is not. It is time to plan what I want to do with what is important to do. We can provide additional opportunity for naming what I want/can do. Tools like “point of choice”, PPDP (personal, professional development plan) can be used.</p>
Applying	<p>Wish our participants to have good luck and be happy. And we can do NOTHING else and I think it is important to be aware that it is the moment when we let go. Unless we want to sell a coaching service. Why not?</p>

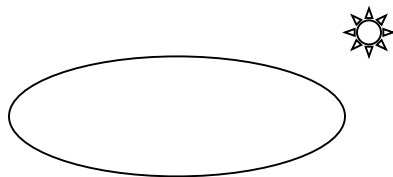
**The table is not finished and is to be continued by you and by me!**

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### ***Four main ways of positioning yourself with a group***

Having looked at very specific elements, let’s go back to some more general issues. It seems that - in whatever we do as trainers - we position ourselves differently to the group. I noticed four main, different ways of positioning ourselves.

#### **Observing**



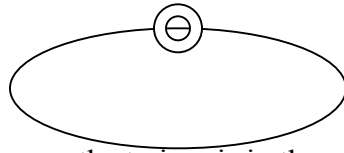
The trainer/facilitator is outside the group, usually looking from above. It allows you to have an overview, to stay not involved, perceiving the general view. But there is a “cost”: your emotional relationship with the group.

#### **Confronting**



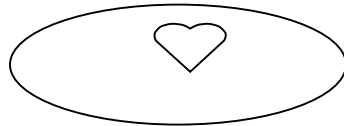
The trainer mirrors what s/he sees/thinks/feels about the group. It allows you to disagree with the group, to express both positive and negative feelings. But there is a “cost”: some risk to be rejected by the group. You present yourself as DIFFERENT from the group.

## Coordinator



This role means the trainer is in the group, but with a specific function in it – not to observe, not to interact, but just to co-ordinate the process as it is without too much intervention. Important to notice that the trainer somehow works without much power, because he/she is busy with their function.

## Participant



This role basically means that the trainer places themselves on the same level as participants and participates based on feelings and takes part in all activities that are suggested by the trainer or by somebody else. It gives direct emotional human-to-human contact with everyone in the group. But it “costs”... the trainer.

Some "final thoughts"...

When reading the above, I hope it is possible to recognise such things in our own practice: when do we do it? how do we do it? Are we comfortable with all four positions to the group? Generally speaking it is important to be able to be in all four positions towards the group. It is very important that at least one brain in the planet has a general picture of the group. It is very important that we are able to confront the group with the task, with the question, with reactions, with support and with frustration. It is very important from time to time just to facilitate the process and to do nothing else, because the group will do the rest. And it is very important from time to time just to disappear in the group so to build up authentic contact. But in practice we notice we are more comfortable in some of the positioning and less comfortable with another. For example, it may be that we are good in the participating position, but confronting the group is not our piece of cake. After noticing that, I think it is good for trainers to decide what they do with it. Try to experiment and try out different positioning? Should I count on my team partners so they cover some positioning? Still, in any case it is useful to learn to notice our positioning. And maybe we will find other ways of positioning ourselves than those four presented here. But the most important thing is to find our own way.

Dr Arturas Deltuva, May 2010