

# “INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION”

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## “Living at the boundary”\*

Growth circles & edgework as a model to facilitate experiential learning processes.

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Outward Bound® focuses on people who wish to learn and to grow. But how do people develop? What factors influence change and deep level learning? What are key elements to facilitate these processes in an experiential way? Why is experiential learning -in an outdoor framework- such a powerful change agent?

Years of research and everyday experience in facilitating individuals in groups helped Outward Bound to 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 en Schön, 1974, 99 in Hovelynck, 1999-2000). Such “figures of thought” range from the relatively simple images we have about specific tasks or daily used objects, 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... (Hovelynck, 1999-2000).

Consequentially, our work can benefit from a perspective on how these “figures of thought” -in particular the deeper and more complex ones- develop. In this view, intervening in the learning process, at the very moment when the individual is confronted with the boundaries of his “figures of thought”, seems very powerfull.

### 1. Figures of thought

#### Frames of reference

Figures of thought, mental images, frames of reference, emotional schemes, action-theory (theory-in-use), experiential knowledge, assumptions : all different names for the same drives which control behavior and actions. These figures of thought determine the way people perceive themselves, perceive and approach others, They determine how people shape and

experience interactions, build relationships with others, give meaning to situations and experiences and co-construct their reality.

## 2. The heart of experiential learning (Hovelynck, 2003)

The following summary of successive stages in the experiential learning process is only intended to give an easy overview.

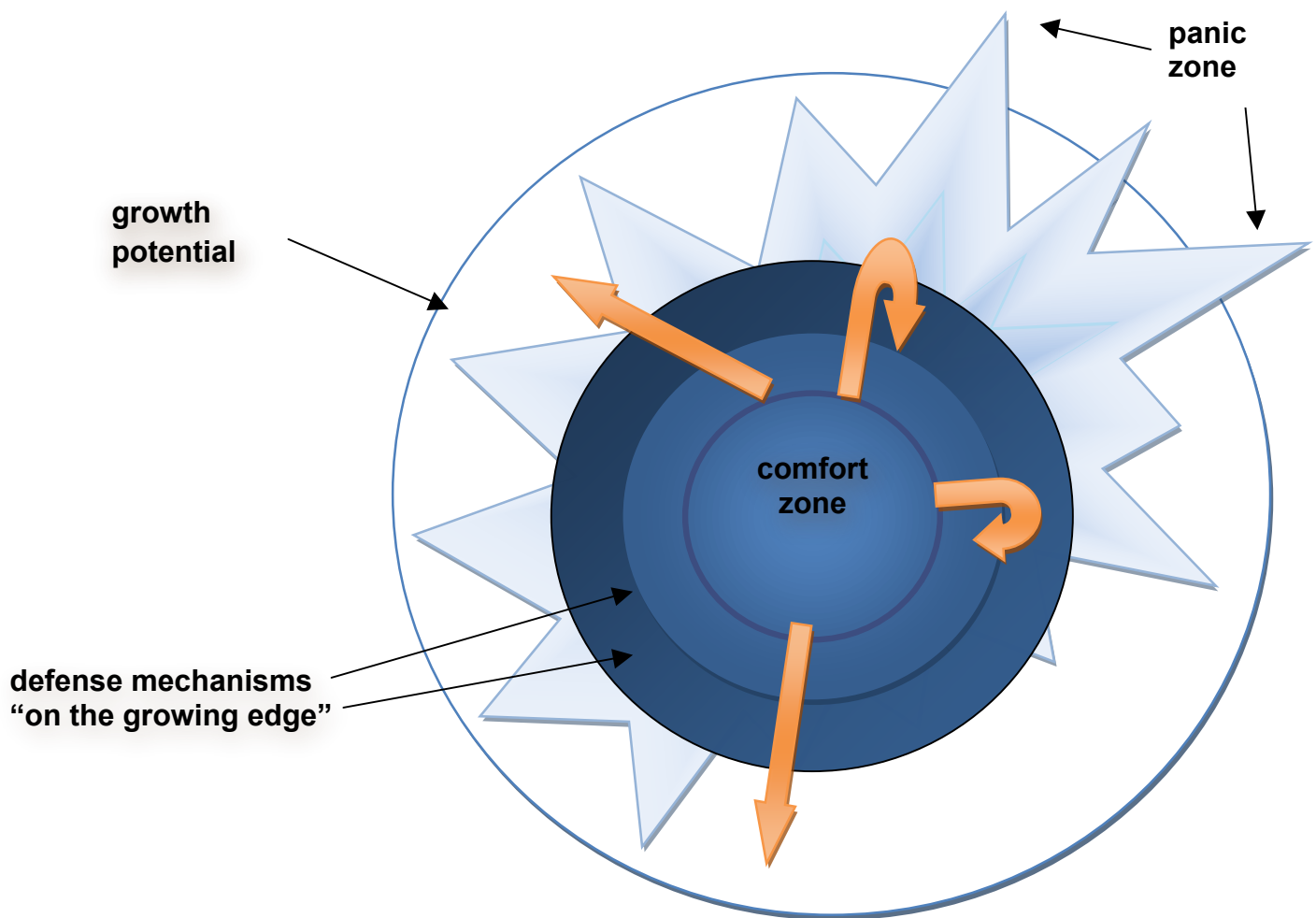
The first stage (1) occurs when people highlight and recognize behavioral and emotional patterns. People become aware of and gain insight in their own experiential knowledge. (2) Acknowledging, accepting and owning up one's own figures of thought underlying the behavior patterns and taking responsibility rather than blaming others/the situation, is the second stage. If desired, the third stage (3) is experimenting, exploring alternative ways to behave more efficient and -in depth- to generate alternative figures of thought. This stage means literally a breakthrough in the learning process. The integration (4) of the new frames of reference in the people's essence form the fourth and last stage. This condition implies that people do not only *behave* different. They *are* different, they have changed. They developed and broadened their frames of reference, which gives them a wider and freer range to act and to be.

## 3. Growth circles

A key figure based upon the models of Processing at the edge (Nadler & Luckner, 1997) and Comfort-Stretch-Panic (Rohnke, dd unknown)

People literally do not 'unlearn'. The objective of the experiential learning process is growth, increase, to (re)gain more degrees of freedom to yourself. Because the figures of thought have limitations, development of additional ones is meaningful. It helps people in order to efficiently conduct themselves in a wide range of everyday situations.

Key factor in development can be a moment of surprise, frustration, "a sense of stuckness". Disequilibrium as a major catalyst for change. Even though it is frightening or difficult this disequilibrium creates a creative tension, a state of confusion wherein a quality of disorganization predominates. The act of restructuring to regain equilibrium and balance is where either old figures of thought are preserved and strengthened, or new figures of thought occur or are generated (Nadler & Luckner, 1977).



-figure 1-

3.1. The **comfort zone** (-figure 1-) is the collection of experiential knowledge. It is the result of education, learning, broad mutual interaction between a person and his environment. These frames of reference and behavioral forms feel very familiar, known, obvious, “comfortable”, easy... for the person involved. This zone includes everyday activities such as doing the same things and mixing with the same people, behavior based on the very familiar -often unconscious- frames of reference.

Examples:

- E always ends the activities before she gets “the finish” : she climbs up 5 meters below the anchor point, returns in the cave corridor, cancels to climb on the pole at the high ropes course. She even returned from an internship abroad before it was completed. A returning pattern driven by an underlying belief that it is better to quit than to fail, and to save herself for -what she feels as could be- shameful failure.
- Debriefs are difficult. What is the value ? Recurring questions ... till the moment C suggests to me a question about authenticity. A conversation leads us to the essence and the awareness of the underlying frame : her inability and her desire to share feelings in an appropriate way for her

- T is convinced if he fully understands -at the knowledge level- the theory on facilitating experiential learning processes, he'll behave different as a facilitator. This figure of thought prevents him to look deeper into himself, and his own style.

The "size" of the comfort zone varies with the individual. The comfort zone of a number of socially vulnerable youth is probably as big as a handkerchief. Their arsenal of mental images -and the behavioral possibilities based on these- is limited and limiting. They are stuck in a number of polarized mental imaged and one-sided assumptions.

Examples:

- The outside world is threatening
- Adults mean "power," are out to get you, can't be trusted and you'll always get the short straw
- Survival means not showing any vulnerability

They quickly reach their "limit," in the sense of the limits and limitations of their frames of reference and behavioral possibilities.

3.2. People enjoy comfort. It's easy to be comfortable, easy to potter along, but **learning requires challenge and discomfort** if people are to grow through experience and develop new skills. A person can choose to stretch himself (challenge by choice), or through situations presented by others (bosses/colleagues/peers – coaches/therapists/mentors).

At the beginning of an Outward Bound® program people often express their expectations "to transcend their limits". They usually mean : a physical limit ... This is not the essential "core" of experiential learning.

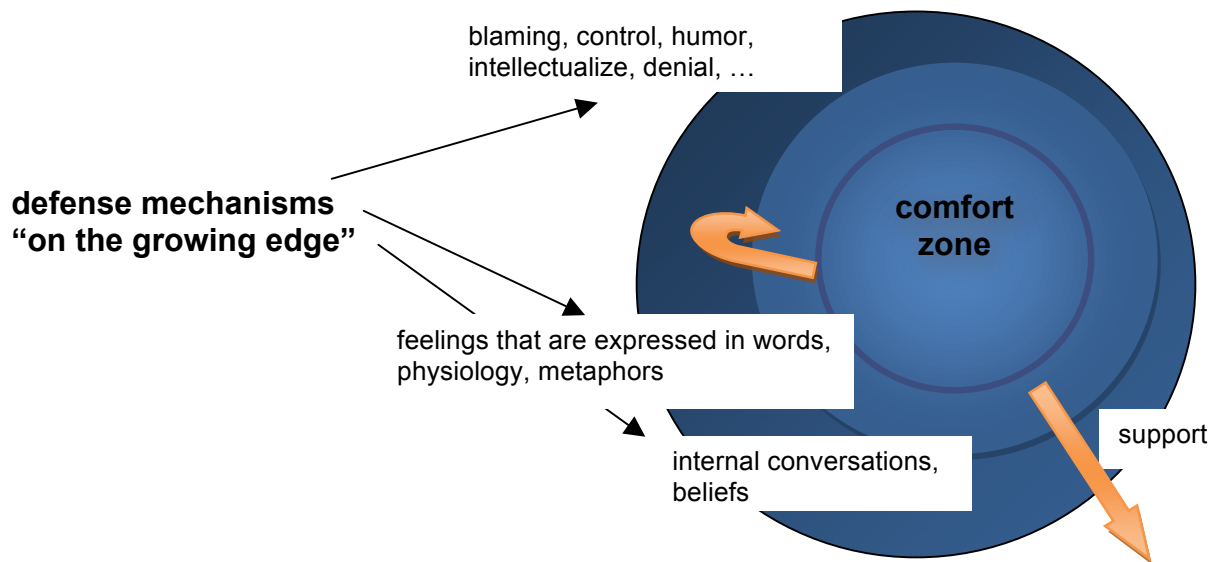
Example:

- An event in which some aspect of re-framing figures of thought are recognizable happened on the second day of a course : to climb on "the little wooden house" without using any equipment (construction : about 2,5 meters high flat front wall, sloping roof on top ) . J always helps the others, jumps in where needed, caring, committed, emotional involved. That's her way to be part of the group. "This is not my cup of tea, I don't necessarily need to climb on top. I prefer to not go. Actually, I already did it once." Evidence-based on the frames of reference on which J acts. A group discussion follows, compromise, ...??, consensus, ... ?? An other participant puts it sharply : "Only those who will climb on the roof, are allowed to help and support physically." A sense of stuckness. Apparent confusion and emotion in J. Being confronted with the limits of her existing frame of reference. *This* situation requires J to reframe. "I help the group by not helping." The proces flows again.

Life's rich stream of demands confronts people with many challenges. New, unknown situations in which people are not able to respond from their familiar comfort zone. Changing requirements in which the familiar frames of reference and the existing behavioral patterns turn out to no longer be effective, and create uneasiness. Such situations confront people with the limitations of their figures of thought and cause confusion, surprise, frustration, disappointment and fear. Nadler & Luckner call this "**disequilibrium**" (Nadler en Luckner, 1997). The closer one gets to the "edge," the more the uneasiness is felt.

Very quickly, a plethora of **defense mechanisms** ("**wall of defense**", Nadler & Luckner, 1997) become prominent (-figure 2-). People develop defense mechanisms as a personal protection against anxiety – the anxiety of being confronted with core feelings: inadequacy, loneliness, pain, rejection, shame, helplessness... and / or to reveal these feelings in relationship with others. Defense mechanisms are ways to deal with this anxiety: denial, blaming others, taking

control, rage, aggression, overly-responsible, perfectionism, intellectualizing, charming others and humor.



-figure 2-

Examples:

- "I can't do this". "Today I'm not in the mood, why should I do it?"
- "My father always said that boys don't cry"
- "I'm going to make a fool of myself"
- "Whatever I do myself is always done best. I can't possibly release control."

These are examples of mechanisms, internal / external dialogues, which result in people "on the way to explore alternative assumptions and additional behavioral forms" (Hovelynck, 2000) in the proximal development zone, and end up retreating to the familiar comfort zone.

Usually these moments pass quickly without the awareness of individuals or the group and are generally lost for current and future learning. Although it is in these brief moments prior to breakthrough or withdraw that the ingredients for change are found.

Becoming aware of the (possibilities and) limitations of the frames of reference, the desire for change, self-support and support from the surroundings in such situations (safety, challenging but feasible), will determine whether people at this important point, **the edge**, grow towards the exploration of new possibilities in the **growth zone (proximal development)**.

Examples:

- "If I don't wait too long and X coaches me, then I dare to give it a try."
- "If I notice that I can trust someone else, then I dare to let go of control every once in a while. It helps me, relieves, gives me more freedom."
- C talks about her confusion not being authentic when she only uses rational arguments while she actually would like to express her feelings. "But I never learned. It was not done in my family." I see her tears. The sorrow and desire are simultaneously visible. "How can I try to do it different in the future?" Moving moments.

**Growth** is the development of alternatives, the reframing of figures of thought, the construction of supplemental assumptions and behavioral forms. Experiential learning occurs when people recognize their action-theory and develop, if they wish, additional or alternative action-theory (Hovelynck, 2000). In this way, the comfort zone is literally expanded. The boundary of the comfort zone moves outward. From now on people are different, with more possibilities, more flexible, approaching the world through renewed and reframed mental images.

3.3. The **growth zone** (-figure 1-) is the area of novelty, exploration and adventure. It is an **arsenal of growth potential**, the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1933). This concept indicates that it's about feasible and attainable possibilities. Here are the things that are a little or a lot out of the ordinary, the things people haven't done for a long time or have never done before.

This zone is not always a comfortable place, foreign, but it is a stimulating one. It contains an arsenal of alternative mental images and, based on these, new behavioural possibilities to explore. If the exploration doesn't please, one can return to their safe comfort zone. Or people can explore another alternative found in the proximal development zone. And if this fits and is desirable, people will anchor and integrate this.

3.4. Nadler en Luckner propose a number of **conditions** necessary for being able move beyond the comfort zone to explore the possibilities in the proximal development zone (Nadler & Luckner, 1997).

Among others:

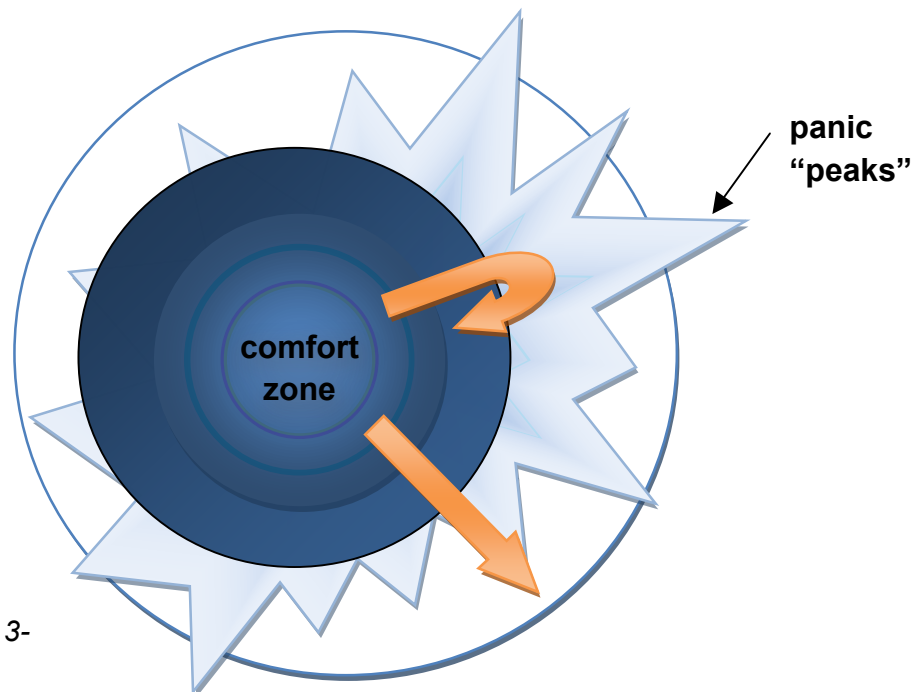
- Hope and perspective. Believing in the ability to evolve to a way of being which one will experience as better. Feasible (challenging) goals. Not too big, split into feasible sub-goals, in small, surveyable steps.
- Readiness to take risks. Stimulating the initiative and responsibility of the learner. Fear and hope go hand in hand. Facilitating to make the desire bigger, more conscious and tangible (see facilitator's stance process triangle). Not hiding the fear, consciously using it as an important indication: one is most scared of that which he needs most. When possibilities and difficulties "match", it generates engagement.
- "A sense of the unknown and unpredictable" . "A sense of stuckness". Dealing with the situation: literally wanting to / daring to experience, consciously step into the situation = immersion in the experience → triggering the generative figures of thought → dealing with a mix of desire and fear → felt sense of the new possibilities
- Trust  
Reliability. Sufficient support: from the surrounding environment, from the relationship, within oneself
- Program design. A proposal never stands alone. A 'process' is a combination of interlinked phases and learning steps, of links between here-and-now and there-and-then. Experiencing and acknowledging one's own motives and assumptions implies the realization that alternative ones are also possible. In a program which is built up step by step, each next proposal implies opportunities to explore these alternatives.

3.5. What about the **panic zone** (-figure 1 and 3-)?

Unlike Rohnke's model (Rohnke, dd unknown), we do not consider "the panic zone" as a fixed and static area beyond the growing edge of things-to-be-avoided either because they are unacceptable or because they are currently a 'stretch' too far!

The difference in significance between fear and panic often depends on people's inner and outer conditions -as described earlier (cfr. 3.4.). Carefully and deliberately trying to deal with the risk is important. **Panic** is a condition where learning is not possible. A facilitator is very alert at key moments "on the edge", and facilitates the exploration, ensuring that the desire for development remains tangible and the fear manageable.

It is difficult to grasp the dynamics of the learning process in a static image. When people take a -big- step out of their comfort zone, the fear of the unknown increases. Unfortunately when most people find themselves in the panic zone they run straight back to their comfort zone. Support, trusting oneself and others, keeping conscious contact will help working through the scary bits and making a way to the growth zone...



- figure 3-

#### 4. Processing at the edge

4.1. **Processing at the edge** refers to that very specific process-moment of the learner when the hope and fear, "core feelings", "disequilibrium" ... "reveal" themselves explicitly. Sometimes clearly, sometimes more hidden.

When the wall of defenses is shaken, even momentarily, some deep feelings might be experienced more profoundly and become better integrated (Nadler & Luckner, 1977). Inquiring "what's happening," naming what we -as a facilitator- see happening at that specific moment, exploring feelings, physiology, belief, conversations, beliefs, support that encompass these moments, increase recognition and awareness. These moments usually pass quickly. Slowing them down by putting them under the microscope, freezing them for a few seconds, -sometimes ...- this is "*all*" that the facilitator can do, but it has inestimable process-value. Sometimes the reaction is rejection, denial, not (yet) being able to give meaning, anger from the learner ... sometimes a breakthrough to fundamental change and growth.

This **moment of reflection-in-action** generates current or future learning. Being trapped increases the willingness of the learner to focus on his restrictive frames and his openness for the intervention of the facilitator.

Example:

- *D stays on the high ropes course element, 6 meters above the ground. Trembling, shaking “no” with his head, not letting loose the staple in the pole behind him. I let it happen, carefully watching. One foot forward, back again. Visible tension. I ask : “What’s happening, D ?”. My intervention, a demand for reflective observation. Not after the action, but right in the middle : processing at the edge. No answer. D climbs down, on the ground he opens the buckle and his safety harness. I keep an eye on him. “What happened D ?” “I can’t do this... Maybe later, I’ll try again.” Tired, impressed, emotional touched. I leave him on his own. When the group is almost ready I remind him of what he said. “So D, what do you want ?” “I’ll try once again,” he says. “If K waits for me at the other side, if he helps and encourages me.” Together they succeed. Few minutes later on the ground. Emotions, words, his story...”It’s a challenge to leave my comfort zone. I always try to do things on my own, definitively. I couldn’t make this. I was hoping I could cancel a second trial, but the facilitator was not forgotten that I promised to try again. The big “jump” to cross the gap in between the two beams was only possible when I could allow K helping me. Normally I look for solutions on my own, not bothering anyone else. To do everything on my own is a dogma. I experienced that this dogma felt limiting and it made “literally” that I couldn’t make progress.”*

4.2. **Edgework** suggests that the facilitator consciously chooses an offer, provides a context where the *possibility* exists that the learner gets confronted with his limits, where he experiences this “sense of stuckness”. And consequentially, he generates *opportunities* for the learner to explore an experiment with new enlarged frames of reference and behavior. This does not mean that the facilitator has a hidden agenda, neither a mission impossible, nor pitfalls, nor unfeasible situations too difficult to realize. This would harm the safety of “a safe emergency-situation” and is contradictory with the trust in the relationship between the facilitator and the learner.

It is almost unpredictable what will happen. It’s a matter of patiently waiting, dealing with “not-knowing”, working with the obvious, awareness, carefully observing recurring -or new !- patterns, shared responsibility to recognize and acknowledge (cfr. 2), trying not to avoid the conflict, the sorrow or the difficulties, consciously intervene or not intervene yet. And *if* the facilitator intervenes it is not to provide technical information to ensure a successful outcome. Sometimes it is good not to succeed, not to find the solution. But instead to discover the meaning and significance of what happens for the learner and to increase introspective and tangible insight.

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