

Reflections on Quality in Experiential Learning

Via Experientia partners

Introduction

This article is the outcome, still in progress, of a reflection done by the “International Academy of Experiential Education” team of facilitators about the significance of experiential learning and the quality of the methodological approach itself. As facilitators and trainers we do not "create experiences" as such – we construct possibilities. It is for the participants to make their experiences and to own the conclusions they draw. Within the Academy we have worked a lot in analysing what we see as essential criteria and processes. At least in terms of "things to consider" when putting together activities through which participants have a good opportunity of gaining meaningful experiences. Is this a check list? Yes, in a way it is! Is this list complete? No! There cannot be a list to cover all eventualities! And whichever way we choose to work, we should make our choices explicit, especially when working in a team!

No doubt many people believe in the saying that experience is the best teacher. It is a popular saying that’s only partially true. Certainly we can learn from our experiences, but only if we do something with them. Experiential learning has its basis in a particular understanding of what learning is and how it happens. Learning is a more or less permanent change in behavior or knowledge that comes about through reflection on experience. Learning leads to change and the implication is that if there is no change, learning has not happened. We do not learn for the sake of learning, but for the sake of changing and growing. If nothing changes as a result of our learning, what have we learnt for? The learning happens not because of what a trainer says, but because of what the learner does. The way this is expressed in theoretical terms is that in the traditional, trainer-centered model of learning, the construct precedes the experience, while in experiential learning, the experience precedes the construct. The construct is developed out of the experience and the development of the construct happens through the process of a “disciplined reflection” on the experience. The reflection is disciplined if it follows certain processes towards a specific goal of learning, in other words to some practical use of the learning. So it is highly personalized learning and the outcomes will likely include a change or changes in behavior that are personally chosen, not imposed or demanded from outside the person. Experiential learning tends, both in its process and its outcomes, to be anti-authoritarian. Individuals are encouraged to make their own connections, their own theories, about the way things are. That is another characteristic: the learning in this model will tend to be focus on “the way things are”, rather than “the way things should be.” It is a learning rooted in the individuals’ perceptions and emotions, not in the “received” reality. Experiential learning is not “about” things outside of the individuals

involved. It is learning that creates reality out of the common, shared experience. All of this means that individuals involved in such learning tend to develop their creativity, their independence of thought and their relationship skills. However the reflection on experience should be shared with the other members of the group of learners and the facilitator itself, as feedbacks given are fundamental to the learner for having a wider and more objective perspective to focus on the learning outcomes. All of this implies that the traditional trainer-learner relationship is radically altered. Traditionally learners have been seen as “empty vessels” waiting to be “filled” with learning given them by the trainer. The trainer is seen as the source of knowledge while the learner is seen as lacking that knowledge. The characteristic of that relationship is one of dependence. The learner is dependent on the trainer for all his or her knowledge. The learner's experience and knowledge is discounted and usually ignored as irrelevant to what the trainer wants to deliver. In an experiential learning situation the learner is responsible for his or her learning and so has a less dependent relationship with the trainer, usually called a “facilitator” in this situation. This is a crucial point in terms of the effect of the “how” of learning on the individual and, ultimately, on society. In experiential learning the learner is encouraged to think for himself/herself, not to repeat the thought patterns of the trainer. This means that the facilitator - learner relationship a more equal, open relationship with the facilitator standing metaphorically beside the learner providing support and constructive feedback rather than criticism or rewards. In this way, in a sense, an authentic relationship becomes the vehicle for learning.

The search for Quality in experiential learning

The word learning is significant here, since it emphasizes the learner's perspective, which is crucial to the experiential learning concept. The word experiential essentially means that learning and development are achieved through personally-determined experience, discoveries and involvement. We might also regard experiential learning as enabling a person to grow from the inside, whereas conventional teaching and training is the transfer of capability and knowledge into a person from the outside.

The awareness and the development of people, which is at the heart of experiential learning, also implicitly enables learning methods to fit each person's own effective learning styles and natural preferences in the precise moment of learning, because learners are encouraged and helped to learn and develop in their own ways. When people can be supported in discovering that learning and development can be emotionally involving and rewarding, this provides a platform for all sorts of learning and development in the future.

The learner is central to the process. The principle that the success of the experiential approach to learning depends on the learners is fundamental. Therefore the facilitator must understand that

learners can only make best use of their learning opportunities if they are ready, willing and able to become personally involved in the learning process: learners have to be prepared to actively develop their understanding, critique and evaluate the messages in their context and then work hard to apply appropriate learning. 'Learning' extends the idea of personal development and thereby professional development to beliefs, values, wisdom, compassion, emotional maturity, ethics, integrity and behaviors.

In many European educational and training contexts there is a variety of interpretation and application of experiential learning methodology (intended as philosophical approach) which may create confusion among learners and experts in reference to understanding the methodology itself and at the same time may undermine its pedagogical power. For this reason we, as a group of experts in the “International Academy of Experiential Education”, have been investigating how to define the quality of experiential learning courses.

Before proceeding to an approximate definition of quality enhancement and criteria in experiential learning courses, we carried out a **survey in four European countries** (Belgium, Iceland, Italy and Lithuania) in order to explore the different experiences and training proposals in the field of experiential learning. Our study team has analyzed approximately 100 experiential learning training modules run by public and private training agencies. We know the survey cannot be considered exhaustive, but it allowed us to compare different experiences in Europe and to identify common points amongst them.

The first pattern to emerge is that experiential learning comes in all shapes and sizes. Although the outdoors seems to be the most used context, there are many others that are used for experiential learning courses such as theatre, kitchen, role play, painting, creative writing, and rugby. (We don't think there is anything wrong in that - the more offers there are on the market, the better it is for the learners!) Still, the overall impression we had was that in these different training offers more importance was given to the activities run than to methodology.

The second pattern to emerge regards the most prevalent topics in experiential learning. All over Europe the common tendency is to link experiential learning to the following topics: team building, leadership, public speaking, conflict management, communication and - particularly in northern Europe - personal development. Our impression is that the tendency is not only to set a particular topic, but also to establish clearly what the learning outcomes must be before a course is run.

The third pattern to emerge from the survey is that the majority of the courses are short-term. For sure today's European culture of obtaining effective results in a brief time and with a minimum effort has also affected the training and education market. So we find that although it has widened its horizons addressing learners with creative and effective training offers, it has also encouraged a kind of culture of “educational consumerism”: offering easily consumed

experiential learning training courses based on charming activities and that have clear learning outcomes reachable in a short time. These kind of courses mainly give importance to:

- the activities rather than to the learning process itself;
- trainers who deliver attractive activities and clear learning outcomes more than to facilitators of the learning process
- rigidly-structured training modules more than to flexible ones;
- reaching pre-determined objectives in a short time, rather than respecting the pace, the flow and the learners' way of learning (how to learn).

In reference to the patterns emerged from the survey, we think that stakeholders understand more easily a training course program that includes detailed described activities for what concerns type, timing and learning outcomes, as they probably feel more comfortable in knowing what to expect.

Instead we think that an experiential training course can focus on general aims, can plan suitable activities that may change during the course according to the flow of the group and can clarify its methodological approach and give general possible learning outcomes.

Comparing our own practice to that revealed in the survey we in the "International Academy of Experiential Education" team realised that we try to give importance to forms of experiential learning which cannot be supplied and consumed by learners easily and quickly; rather for the quality enhancement of experiential learning courses we place emphasis on:

- the learning process and the methodology rather than the activities;
- facilitators of the learning process rather than trainers who deliver attractive activities and clear learning outcomes
- the learners' pace, flow and ways of learning (how to learn) rather than reaching pre-determined objectives in a short time.
- flexible training modules rather than rigid ones;

Keeping in mind the different experiences, proposals and cultures in experiential learning, we thought that it could be presumptuous and not in line with the actual situation, to define quality criteria that could be applied to any experiential learning training course. Based on our experiences, convictions and knowledge on the topic, we thought it is better to enhance an experiential learning culture that keeps in consideration a deep and long-lasting learning process.

Our vision of quality in experiential learning.

Before going into too much detail about the main elements of "quality" it is important to specify that we agree that for us "quality criteria" in the learning process give us orientation and inspiration and should not to be confused with "performance indicators" - they are not a tool for quality "control" but more an opportunity for quality "enhancement". Quality cannot be reduced

merely to numbers (as Aristotle showed) but is more something to be evaluated through participation and negotiation with the learner.

When planning and running training activities, the quality evaluation areas, which we consider are the most important, are the following :

- the learning process
- the facilitator's role
- the learners' pace, flow and ways of learning (how to learn)
- flexibility of the training modules

The learning process

Experiential learning is a cyclic process that integrates immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action. To learn something, one has to notice it and be motivated to do something about it through a conscious effort. This integration of cognitive, emotional, volitional components of personality, social relations and soul implications means a holistic, whole-person approach to learning. Experience gives food for reflective thinking, which in turn leads to abstract conceptualizations and hypotheses to be tried out through active experimentation. Practical action, in turn, yields concrete experiential material for reflection. Theoretical concepts can become part of the individual's frame of reference only after he/she has experienced them meaningfully at an emotional level. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge, as it were, between experience and conceptualization. The model also cautions against the opposite extreme, the assumption that any experience leads automatically to learning. Reflection needs to be followed by the framing and conceptualizing of the phenomena through appropriate theory-building. However not all experience is educative, even if reflected on seriously!! In Experience and Education Dewey says that sometimes experience can be negative or non- or mis-educative, Because some experiences stop or distort growth, lead to cynicism, lack of feelings or to narrow the possibilities to further growth. This is why the facilitator needs to create possibilities for meaningful experience.

When reflecting on quality, we thought above all about how to “facilitate” learning processes through a group experience, as the group is one of the key elements for learners to achieve their learning goals and their personal and professional improvement and development. We see the major objectives of an experiential learning training course as both personal and professional development, according to personal learning needs and a set of key competences to develop. Learners learn experientially by reflecting on their experiences, developing personal insights and understandings through involvement in intellectual, emotional and physical activity. Experiential learning involves people in working things through for themselves and developing their own understanding, so facilitators should always be seeking ways to enable this to happen.

These observations are drawn from our conviction that facilitators create learning conditions for an experience based on the quality of the learning process, necessary to achieve clear individual and group objectives if that learning process is:

- continuously analyzed and shared amongst the team of trainers/facilitators and the learners

- focused on the learning needs of each individual and on the dynamics of the entire learning community including the team of trainers, as facilitators, without losing their responsibility of guiding the process, merge with the group as learners with their learning needs and in the quest for meaning

We think that in order to get involved in an effective learning process it is essential that facilitators create “learning conditions” based on the principles of “cooperative learning” and “learning to learn”. A “learning community” enables participants to open up their thinking to others in a dialogic process. Dialogue essentially entails a respect for the other person, encountering him or her as a unique person and being ready for genuine interaction and sharing of meanings. It also means an openness to the subject matter at hand, aiming at understanding the diversity of views and opinions. Building a community of learners is fostered by the use of the cooperative learning approach. Cooperative learning groups provide a supportive safe environment for people to stretch out of their comfort zone and explore new points of view, new understandings and in general new experiences, that enable each participant to learn and to grow both at a personal and group level.

Learning from and with each other requires “learning conditions” that offer:

- the group the opportunity of creating group dynamics which support cooperative learning;
- each individual the necessary support to clarify for themselves what and how they want to learn ;
- the group and the individuals a safe physical and psychological environment, where they can open up and feel relaxed for entering the learning process;
- diversity in the group composition, meaning people with different professionalities, different cultural backgrounds, as this is an additional stimulation for understanding the existence of different angles and for developing a critical thinking.

We think that to set appropriate learning conditions requires time – and this differs from group to group and even from group stage to group stage.

When speaking of “quality of the learning process” we want to emphasize that it is important to reflect about and pay attention to the flow of the group, by reading the following signs at each stage:

- the feelings and behaviors of each person involved in the activities;
- the group dynamics;
- how the group uses the resources at their disposal both for setting and achieving common objectives;
- the personal and professional relations amongst the members of the learning community,
- the way people consciously perceive themselves at an emotional and behavioral level in situations that require a personal involvement for overcoming their personal, physical, emotional, affective and cognitive challenges.

The facilitators' role

If we assume that facilitation is about the process of supporting people to explore, learn and change, we can agree on the fact that effective facilitation demands competences, skills, techniques and attitude, that need to be underpinned by a thorough understanding of the role and responsibilities of the facilitators and an authentic belief in, and commitment to, the whole process.

The facilitators makes it possible for other people to work together, to learn and to reach their goals. This calls for the facilitators assuming a modest and almost imperceptible role and the letting go of an adviser's or trainer's perspective. The facilitators don't have the answers to the questions, but asks questions. They are not experts who are a source of ideas, information or solutions: they have no house of wisdom. The facilitators do not manage nor entertain the group, but they do follow the flow of the process and they support learners to make better use of their potential by supporting them draw on and develop their personal skills, abilities and knowledge. Facilitators use their knowledge of group processes and their sensitivity to formulate and deliver the needed structure for experience and reflection to be effective.

One of the main competences we think facilitators should have is flexibility for meeting the needs of the different individuals and of the group in a variety of situations. Ideally facilitators should be seen as a third party not taking sides, but intervening for offering feedback and insights. Facilitating requires an active listening to each member's views and remaining curious about how their reasoning differs from others (and the facilitators' private views as well), so that facilitators can help the group engage in effective conversation.

Facilitators are not the decision-makers, nor mediators, they are not involved in the actual making of decisions and they should avoid placing themselves in the middle of disputes – interpreting one to another. Their task is to invite participants engage with each other directly. Facilitators are experts on, and advocates of, process. While there may be times when facilitators teach – what we might describe as organized moments dedicated to encouraging particular learning– most of the facilitators' attention when facilitating is on encouraging reflection around experiences and process, or to other aspects of the group. Effective facilitation of learning and change is dependent on the people facilitators are and the way they are experienced by others.

Let us look further at these qualities, attitudes that facilitate learning. Facilitators have to be experienced as authentic, they have to care for and respect people, and they need to develop some sense of what might be going on for others. In part they do this by coming to understand themselves. This particular way of thinking about facilitating and planning activities is based in an orientation that values what people bring into experience, and about what can develop out of engaging with some subject or issue that has meaning to them. It isn't based upon objectives set by the facilitator beforehand, or the 'delivery' of some package. One of the facilitators' concern is

to facilitate an environment in which participants can ‘own’ the subject and the relationships in the group. Thus, facilitators need to consider what both them - and the participants might want - and involve them in making decisions about the character and direction of the experience. One of the implications of this is that facilitators have to follow the flow and the pace of the group – and need to take in consideration questions and issues as they arise. This might involve moving off the initial subject and returning to it. The learning experience includes emotions that facilitators need to address properly as they are a fundamental part of the group process and learning.

When facilitating, things can become unpredictable - and what facilitators’ thought was the focus of the session shifted to emotional matters and relationships. If facilitators are to work with the feelings and concerns of people in the group then there will often be times when they need to go ‘off-plan’. It could be that more appropriate things to explore appear in conversation and during the activity, so sometimes facilitators simply need to change the plan when people appear with a pressing problem or question. However, using a prepared plan or not, facilitators always need to have a sense of direction for their work.

Much of the job of facilitation is done by the facilitators’ presence in the group rather than them being the centre of the activity. If they are able to communicate authenticity, care and respect for the group, and empathy, it can help to build an environment in which feelings can be expressed and work done. Facilitation implies working with the group to make sessions safe places for dialogue and exploration. At the same time facilitators should encourage honesty and challenge. Supporting people to make an assessment of their understanding of the issue, task or question that was the focus of the experience for them and what, if any, action they need to take individually or as a group.

Facilitation is a challenging work that calls forth a range of emotions. It’s for this reason that we strongly believe that it should be processed by a team of facilitators, who share the same methodological approach and values, but that have their own style, their uniqueness, their authenticity, their approach to people and who give their own contribution. The “International Academy of Experiential Education” team even if so diverse in style, competence and personal attitudes, shares among its members values based on:

- Respect of diversity
- Openness in giving and receiving feedback
- Openness for change
- Encouraging creativity
- Caring for people and loving
- Constructivism, curiosity, humor
- Respect of the environment
- Authenticity

These values inspire and enhance our philosophical and pragmatic approach.

The learners' pace and ways of learning (how to learn)

“Learning from experience it’s not at all an automatic process. It requires important basic abilities to be activated. After all from experience we just draw data for knowledge, not knowledge itself: in fact experience sometimes gives us a set of unrefined information. We can transform those data in knowledge only when we evaluate them for what they really mean and we know what to do with them. Unfortunately this is not an easy thing to do, as the data that come from experience may be interpreted in several ways” (Rino Rumiati, 2000).

In order to encourage useful interpretation of experience for learning and growing, it becomes important that during a training course the learner is supported in activating his/her abilities to elaborate the training experience. It is not by chance that the most delicate step requiring particular attention and emphasis during facilitation is the review of the experience, the reflection, the confrontation within the group and the coaching.

During these stages the learner activates a lot of emotional and cognitive energy and several personal abilities and attitudes for understanding and learning. During a training course the learner goes through these stages either alone or in the group with the facilitator’s support, as he/she might have more resources and points of view for reading in a critical way the experience and for analyzing his /her own learning needs and abilities. The learner goes through an intensive period of active social-constructivism, by revising and rebuilding his/her construct of meaning/world in a social context: the group. These stages, that might require different timing for each learner, allow learners to:

- Be aware of their emotions, behaviors, thoughts and abilities;
- Clarify their learning needs;
- Define their learning objectives by a careful evaluation;
- Set strategies how to reach their learning objectives.
- Change.

Flexibility of the training modules

For what stated above, we believe that experiential learning training modules may be set before only in a general way. It's important to set the aim, the methodological approach to be used and the activities arranged to fulfill such aim. Time is a variable that can be estimated only partially. While the timing of a certain activity can be estimated before, the time that the group requires to review the experience and the time required by each learner to learn is just partially estimable. For this reason each training module should be adapted and renegotiated according to the group's way of learning and the time that this requires.

The awareness of the learner's need to learn is the first step for learning and growing and as this requires times that are different for each learner, we think that, in order to achieve long lasting learning objectives centered on the learner, an experiential learning training course should respect the pace, the flow, the review and learning abilities of each learner. We don't believe that after an activity a review done in a certain timeframe leads to certain predetermined learning outcomes. Rather we think that a certain activity might be considered an opportunity where several information risen, can be useful to the learner for gaining the necessary awareness useful to set learning objectives and ways how to achieve them.

For those wanting to look back into history, here is a short reminder...

Where does the concept of "quality" come from?

Often when speaking of "quality" we think of the industrial system and the application of certain standards and rules in order to obtain a well made object or service. Those who are involved in business may be already familiar with the ISO 9001 standards, that have been issued worldwide and that once applied are intended to identify an organization that has a "quality management system" (QMS), a set of policies, processes and procedures required for planning and execution (production/ development/service) in its core business area.

QMS integrates the various internal processes within the organization and intends to provide a process approach for project execution. QMS enables the organizations to identify, measure, control and improve the various core business processes that will ultimately lead to improved business performance. Although the standards originated in manufacturing, they are now

employed across several types of organizations. A "product", in ISO vocabulary, can mean a physical object, services, or software.

Looking back at the early 20th century, manufacturers began to include quality processes in quality practices. During World War II, quality became a critical component of the war effort: bullets manufactured in one state, for example, had to work consistently in rifles made in another. The armed forces initially inspected virtually every unit of product; then to simplify and speed up this process without compromising safety, the military began to use sampling techniques for inspection, aided by the publication of military-specification standards and training courses in control techniques.

Later on the idea of quality rather than concentrating on inspection, focused on improving all organizational processes through the people who used them. By the 1970s, quality was emphasizing not only statistics but approaches that embraced the entire organization, became known as total quality management (TQM). In the few years since the turn of the century, quality has moved beyond manufacturing into service, healthcare, education and government sectors.. ISO defines the standards as “documented agreements containing technical specifications or other specific criteria to be used consistently as rules, guide lines or definition of characteristics to ensure that materials, processes and services fit their purpose or objective”.

This presentation of the subject is uncomfortable for those for whom a passive acceptance of quality standards is difficult. In fact, beyond deciding what and how to do it, there's understanding the why and for whom, without which there is a risk of committing errors. This depends, at least partly, on the ambiguity that has always accompanied the concept of quality and the use made of it; its enough to realize that quality is both a characteristic (a well-made object) and a value (a product made with valuable raw materials), meanings that are quite different from each other.

Standards are deeply connected to the quality of the process and its results and this might be the most troublesome issue as there is no agreement on how quality should be applied to the field of education, training and learning.

Written by Angelica Paci and Mario D'Agostino