



Long-term training course
September, 2009 –May, 2010

Phenomenological research:

“Via Experientia: process and outcomes as they are experienced by the participants”

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Research methodology

The research has been based on the Giorgi (1987, 1997, 2002, 2006, 2008) phenomenological research method, which was explored and used for education practices research by members of our consortium Deltuva (1999) and Čepienė (2010) in their doctoral dissertations.

The methodology has been chosen as both the consequence and the link to the process-oriented and learner-centered approach which predominated in the learning methods during the course. Phenomenological research procedures concentrate on the experience as a process and emphasise using participants' personal understanding and its deliberate structure instead of following pre-formulated definitions. Furthermore, the procedure highlights the significance of context.

Giorgi phenomenological research procedure is developed from Husserl's philosophical research method. Husserl's invitation “Back to the things themselves” invites us to create an authentic relation to a phenomenon and its environment, thus phenomenology focuses on the authentic relation between an individual and the objective world, seeks to develop attentiveness or experiences facilitating a new form of interpretation of how and what we experience. Husserl's shift of the focus of concentration in researches from measurable and tangible reality to the experience gives rise to an ethical relationship with reality.

The main philosophical grounds for the research derived from Husserl's phenomenological method and applied in Giorgi's procedures are three steps of understanding the essence: the phenomenological reduction, description and search for essence.

As Giorgi himself put it:

“..to enter into the attitude of phenomenological reduction means to (a) bracket past knowledge about a phenomenon, in order to encounter it freshly and describe it precisely as it is intuited (or experienced), and (b) to withhold the existential index, which means to consider what is given precisely as it is given, as presences, or phenomenon.”(1997, p. 240)

“To describe means to give linguistic expression to the object of any given act precisely as it appears within that act.”(1997, p. 241)

“The essence is the most invariant meaning for a context. (...) Whatever is given factually becomes one example of possible instances of the phenomenon, and by multiplying possibilities one becomes aware of those features that cannot be removed and thus what is essential for the object to be given to consciousness”(1997, p. 242)

Following the above philosophical principles, the structure of our research procedure based on the Giorgi (1997) descriptions has been the following:

- Collecting verbal data
- Reading the data
- Dividing the data into parts based on meaning discrimination
- Expression of the data into the language of specific profession/discipline
- Revealing the essential structure of the phenomenon (in relation to the varied manifestations of an essential identity).

Collecting verbal data

Via Experientia long-term training course participants were interviewed two to three months after the programme was over. Eight people were interviewed: three from Iceland, one from Belgium, two from Italy and two from Lithuania. Criteria for choosing the people for interviews were their fluency in English or Lithuanian (languages of the researchers), ability and motivation to reflect and share their experience and deep involvement in the course. The main aim of the interview was to encourage people to tell as much as possible about how they lived the course. The main question which was asked by the interviewer was: “Please tell me your story how did you live the Via Experientia course from the very beginning until now. Tell me as much as you can without judging what is right to say or what is not, what is positive, what is negative, or what is pleasant to hear, or what is not. Just tell your story as it is experienced by you”. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, they were recorded on digital recorder and transcribed.

Reading the data

Before the beginning of the analysis it was important to read through all the data to get an overall view and global sense of the phenomenon described.

Dividing of the data into parts based on meaning discrimination

The philosophical principle of phenomenological reduction calls for bracketing (temporary putting aside) all the previous knowledge, but the research analysis can stay within the disciplinary perspective. Thus the process of the division of the texts into meaningful parts was discovery-oriented and based on the emerging of meanings but at the same time it stayed within the context of experiential education.

Expression of the data into disciplinary language

In this step the statements of the participants were transformed in line with the language of experiential education trainers but some quotations from the participants' texts were left in the original as they themselves contained much of the essence of the phenomenon in a very expressive way.

Revealing the essential structure of the phenomenon

Once the essential meaning of every meaning unit is decided by using imaginative variations) and described in the language of the discipline, we discovered several subjects/themes framing the essential structure of the phenomenon:

- Process of the course
- Motivation to join the programme
- Outcomes of the course
- Learning conditions

The above themes have been united in the essential structure as they are in close relations with one another.

The whole structure of participants' experience in the Via Experientia training course discovered in the research is provided below.

Process of the course

Gradual involvement into the process of the course during the International Training Course One (ITC1) was experienced by the participants with ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty about how to learn and how to be here. Tension was also one of the main emotions; for some of the participants it lasted throughout the ten days of the course and even after. Some participants were not so active at the beginning, they tried to protect themselves, stayed as observers in the course.

In general ITC1 was marked by intensive experiences, emotions and transformative personal experiences. During or after ITC1 most of the participants experienced critical moments, which they described as emotional and bodily crises such as tears, feeling cold, breakthrough of emotions, weakness, feeling of self-limitations, sadness, frustration, loss of control, emotional, intellectual and physical tiredness, emptiness. The crises were followed or interconnected with the self-discovery of authenticity, personal disclosure, surprising oneself. Going out of this crisis meant searching "for what I have", "important thing who am I", "listening to one's own voice". The break-through and catharsis after the crisis was experienced as a relief, a will to start changes, motivation, connectedness to the group, inspiration of enthusiasm, wish to get closer, to know deeper the people of the group, honesty in relations with the members of the group on the basis of the discovered authentic way of being, active participation in the activities, discovery that the former experience was meaningful, discovery of the value of the project, further steps became clearer.

The participants experienced full involvement in the course in different phases of the project - some of them experienced it during ITC1, some felt it only after ITC1 reflecting on the course individually, for some participants the full involvement started only during the first national

meeting which followed ITC1. Full involvement was described by the participants as a productive and intensive learning process.

During or after ITC1 the participants experienced strong synergy and connectedness to the group. "People were taking care a lot about each other, accepting each other, personal spaces became smaller, people needed each other".

At the end and right after ITC1 most of the participants felt overwhelmed with emotions and thoughts, thus kept continuing communication with the group by e-mail, they had a lot of energy and will to be active, had the need to share a lot with their families and organisations.

The national meetings between international courses were experienced by the participants as a chance to reconnect to the group, check if the decisions taken in ITC1 had survived. Furthermore, national meetings and practices processes were valuable for participants for the structuring of experience of the ITC1, realising what had been experienced and learned during the ITC1 and checking it out in practice. The participants implemented a process-based approach a lot in their individual practices and experienced success, received support and praise from colleagues. The participants experienced surprise about their success. Their practices gave another chance to reflect about the power of the process-oriented approach. During the practices the participants raised their professional self confidence, they also felt personal growth. The national group's reflection about the practice and feedbacks gave insights and helped to assess the practices deeper, to stay focused.

The return to the second international course (ITC2) was experienced by the participants as the confirmation of the importance of the group, as searching for proof of professional and personal development, and as a place for networking possibilities. Some of the participants experienced ambivalent feelings they did not want the same intensive experience as in the ITC1, but still wanted to return to the international group and test themselves.

ITC2 was marked by the feeling that the atmosphere was safe and open for involvement, inner processes of learning as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. The course was less emotional; concentration was more on individual rather than group experiences.

During ITC2 the participants experienced the end of the whole course as concentrating on their personal professional future, networking and building relations for further projects, feeling balanced and ready for further individual projects. The ITC2 gave the sense of belonging to a community, in which members travel the same paths, nurture similar ideas. This supported and motivated them to continue implementing the newly-discovered strategies at work and for personal development. In closing the course the participants felt sadness about the end but still felt "completely connected with the people", "part of a tribe".

Some participants at the end also felt a bit insecure in continuing their way individually, relying on their own initiatives only, and therefore had a wish to continue working with the trainers.

Motivation to join the programme

The motivation to participate in the course for most participants was rooted in their professional and personal development needs: the wish to learn deeply about the methodology of

experiential education and search for wider self-expression. Another aspect was the search for a way to change personal and professional life, including gaining a wider perspective for helping considerations by bringing in an international rather than national dimension.

Outcomes of the course

One of the most important experiences for the participants in the course was finding their authenticity. The participants felt liberated from certain irrational beliefs that had been limiting their behaviour before, less dependent on their automatic behaviour patterns, they experienced getting rid of imagined obligations in communication with people and it made them feel more relaxed in communication, more like following their honest interests.

Authenticity guided them in changing their patterns of behaviour in relations. They discovered honesty instead of role-play as the basis for communication. Following the discovery and the choice of authenticity they noticed their changing relations with the group in the course. Back home after the course they found their practices successful in their family lives and in their professional practices. Being more sincere and respecting their own nature and their own authentic path, they became more attentive to other people, were learning to listen and not react immediately on the basis of prejudices. They started nurturing more tolerance towards other people, witnessed breaking of stereotypes. The international structure of the course created an important framework for learning respect towards diversities of people. As an outcome of the insights mentioned above and changes of their attitudes in the course, the participants were learning to stay focused with respect even for people who they did not like. They felt like they were becoming more humble, more listening to and open for others. Some of the participant felt themselves to have become completely different persons: more listening, more able to see and accept different points of view; other people in their minds became more partners with shared responsibility instead of objects of influence and manipulations. They felt like being more able to be in the dialogue interaction on a “me-you” level instead of “me-it”.

Other important outcomes were the considerable increase of both professional and personal confidence. The participants are more confident to start new projects, their own companies, change locations of living and ways of work; they can take initiative and risky decisions more easily than before, they initiate changes in their personal life. The strong basis for professional and personal confidence was their deep experience, provided theoretical framework and satisfaction with the good results of the individual practices. The participants noticed that self confidence comes via self awareness. This self-awareness is experienced by the participants as seeing the aspects about their behaviour with other people and themselves that they didn't accept before. Most of the participants feel relaxed about conflicts with the unaccepted; they can work with it. They are listening more to themselves and bring this attitude to the groups that they work with. For some participants the trigger for self-awareness was the feedbacks received from trainers or other participants, which allowed them to check their self image. For other participants the trigger was the experience of a critical moment that gave them realisation of their weaknesses and/or limitations; it was followed by intense emotions of sadness and realisation about certain opportunities that they had missed in their lives and that generated the will to change the situation.

An important discovery for the participants was the process-oriented approach in life and trainings as opposed to their formerly used target-oriented strategies. Concentration on the process revealed to them the importance of noticing interrelations and connections, the power of the flow of emotions in a training process and personal discoveries following this. They personally experienced the power of process-oriented approaches in the course and saw a live example of it in the course trainers' work. During the course they experienced "letting go moments" in the work of a facilitator, for example, staying behind the group and leaving the members to find answers instead of leading the group. They learned a lot about the process of a group and they took on board the approach that a facilitator's role is not to push the group; and that everything comes out of group processes, so they are more confident to apply this approach in their work.

Some of the participants during the course found the field of work that gives them the feeling of meaning in their lives.

Most of the participants are motivated to apply the gained experience and knowledge. They want to stay with their discovery of the process-oriented approach further in their trainers' work. They are choosing the projects where they can nurture it. They try to explain to their organisations and clients the benefits of longer trainings as the basis for concentration on the processes, and they start to review other strategies of training in their organisations. The participants feel open and more confident to work with new target groups and new projects, new forms of work, new organisation. Many of the participants have successfully started new projects in new areas.

The programme outcomes are connected with the motivation and initial processes of every participant. The motivation of most participants to join the course was their search for the way to change their personal and/or professional life. As indicated above, after the Via Experientia course they have taken a number of decisions and actions encouraged by the course in both their professional and personal lives.

The course has also provided a theoretical update on experiential learning, enriched participants' instruments to run educational activities and motivated them for further learning.

The international environment helped participants to become aware of intercultural differences and interpersonal stereotypes, and it created an important framework for learning with respect towards diversities of people.

Learning conditions

The richest learning source was the group of participants. The participants experienced cooperation and support in the group, they distinguished the importance of reflections and feedbacks in the group. Trust, care, acceptance of each other and synergy in the group developed very fast: "It's difficult to explain how you can sit next to someone and lay your head on their shoulder when you have known him only for two days". On the other hand, being in

the group and connecting to it gave tension and fostered learning about the self: “Pictures from the first course with questions related to the group: closely looking at who am I, how do I fit in this group, how do I connect with people, what kind of people I like and dislike, whom I would like to talk to, do people approach me, how do I behave, behaviour patterns, am I afraid to offend people ... all these things were tough”.

Some participants rediscovered the value of communication and relations with other people, realized that even uncomfortable encounters can be taken as a fruitful feedback.

Learning in the group and from the group intensified the learning in the process, learning "here and now". By relating concepts about group dynamics with their own experiences the participants realized new things about themselves and the method of process-oriented training. The safe and close atmosphere in the group and an isolated physical environment helped the participants to open up for the personal learning process and intensified the group processes.

The participants experienced the importance of assessment and of feedback. Feedbacks allowed them to check their own self-images and their imagination about how other people see them; feedbacks were an important tool for correcting and elaborating things during practices; feedbacks were a way to support each other. The participants mostly took feedbacks as learning opportunities. Accepting a negative feedback was experienced as a process by one participant: at first intense negative emotions including deep sadness, pain going together with tears and followed by physical break-down, (without noticing any learning points in it); then starting to see the aspects that he didn't accept before about his behavior with other people and his character; the process of realization started the next day and it is still going on many months after; at last he has started appreciating the experience of the negative feedback; he has started to value it as a useful teaching moment about his character and about his way of dealing with other people. Another thing noticed was that the positive intentions of one trainer was important for the acceptance of the confrontation.

The intercultural context was a stimulation to look at things from different perspectives, as it created an important framework for learning to respect the diversities of people.

Physical and emotional challenges helped participants to get deeply involved. Self reflection, the notes of the process and reflections in the group led to overall understanding of the experiences of the course.

General feeling after the experience of the course

The participants feel the value and deep impact of the course. The course encouraged them to make important changes in their professional and personal lives. The participants are motivated to continue learning and working further in the ways discovered during the course. For some participants the course seems like “a peak of an iceberg”, they are eager to go further and deeper into process-oriented learning both in professional and personal ways. The programme of the course has been evaluated as balanced with a logical flow (intensive experience, quality reflection, intensive coached practice and generalisation) and, in the words of one participant, as "a top class educational activity".

Note:

The course trainers' insights into the above described course essences and their practical implications are going to be explicitly described and discussed in a separate book which is going to be edited and then published in the next years. Please follow information on our webpage www.viaexperientia.net

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