



The Via Experientia User's Guide! (or, how to participate successfully in the course!)

Probably you are aware that the learning results depend on both sides: the learner and the educator. While learning many things it is very important that the educator should present information properly and demand that the student memorizes it, critically evaluates it, and maybe even accepts that it is correct. That is very common in courses where the main aim is to transfer knowledge of other people to the learner. But when working in the field of personal development, in the field of life competences the task of the educator is to organize the environment in which learners can discover their own learning points.

If the role of the educator is different so the role of the learner is also different – and this is what we believe to be the case here in via experientia!

So, what are these roles, or what are the factors of successful participation in this programme? Here we try to put our ideas in one short document and we hope that during the course we can develop these ideas with you.

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So during this course and during other experiential learning courses we invite you to use all the **power of learning in the group**. There are some factors of groups that naturally encourage our personal development. Here are some of them described by I.D.Yalom:

Instillation of hope and universality, meaning that by noticing our inner processes of change we instill the hope in others and by noticing development in others we increase our own hope to develop, to learn to change even if there are some uncomfortable situations during the learning process. It helps when we see that there are similarities, universality in our successes and failures.

Imparting of information – we all have different information and we can enrich each other by sharing it. We can learn from trainers, from group mates and from ourselves by verbalizing our intuitions and verbalizing our experience.

Altruism - opportunity to get support and help somebody else; the feeling of usefulness gives a lot of power and energy.

Development of socializing techniques – being in diverse groups (especially when it is an intercultural group!) social learning or development of interpersonal skills is almost inevitable.

Imitative behaviour – sometimes consciously or not we imitate behaviour of others and by doing this we learn new ways to act.

Catharsis - opportunity for expression of strong emotions in the group has its own power.

Existential factors – in the group there is a strong chance to recognize the basic features of existence through sharing with others (e.g. loneliness, time limits, responsibility for our own actions etc.).

Direct advice and interpersonal learning - receiving and giving suggestions for strategies for handling problems, receiving feedback from others and experimenting with new ways of relating is another natural resource of learning in the group.

We invite you to notice those factors, to employ them and to discover new ones.

From our experience we know that there are some conditions needed for maximum impact of learning in the group:

Continuum or continuity. People in a group have to work together long enough and continuously in order to experience the authentic self: to experience, to recognize, to make choices and to experiment with new behaviours. So we invite you to plan your time so that you can participate in all the process of learning from the beginning till the end.

Safe environment. A safe atmosphere is an environment in which we can experiment with our behaviour freely without being afraid of strict judgment or long-term consequences of our actions. Use the safe environment and contribute to it.

Learners' responsibility for the results of development. Trainers of experiential learning are greatly responsible for organizing the space of learning, creating an impulse for learning, but they only make it possible. The learner's responsibility is to turn that possibility into a result by learning and making final decisions and conclusions.

Ability to notice different stages of group life and to act and think accordingly.

You probably know that every group goes through different stages very similar to the way we go through our lives: birth, childhood (forming), adolescence (norming), adulthood (performing), old age and passing away (reflecting, transferring). It is important that we try to be adequate to the different challenges in those stages. For example to try to tolerate ambiguity in the beginning, to learn to share different feelings (pleasant and unpleasant) and not to be in a hurry to learn a lot during norming, to work hard to go for real things during performing, to slow down for reflecting at the end. This is not easy we know! But raising our awareness about these issues and bringing them out into the open can help all in their learning.

To develop the right attitude

Some people believe that the right attitude is the most important success factor when working for personal development in the experiential learning group. What is specific to this attitude?

Honesty and openness. It means making efforts to recognize our authentic feelings, real thoughts and to express them. Sometimes our thoughts and feelings are uncomfortable, unpleasant and sometimes they are comfortable, pleasant. It is important not to try to make them comfortable or uncomfortable, pleasant or unpleasant. It is important to express our inner reality as it is. Expression of real feelings creates a real connection, the connection that helps to feel reality as it is, not as we would like it to be. Experiencing of reality-as-it-is is a necessary prerequisite for real change. Honesty and openness is useful for the learner oneself, because it helps to name the inner reality better and to become aware about it in this way. But it also useful for other learners as well, because what we name for ourselves can become a good hint or push to others to notice and recognize similar things in themselves.

Respect to yourself and others. It means again the ability to see ourselves and others as we are, but not as we would like us to be. It also means our ability to allow ourselves and others to be different from others and to be different from our demands to ourselves and to others. It helps us to open ourselves as we are and only then after we have a more complete picture of ourselves to look for change in our lives.

Empathy. It is our readiness to sense the mood and state of mind of others. The fact that someone is empathizing with us gives us freedom and support to live our inner states of mind with no limits.

Motivation for change. This is a necessary condition for any kind of development. Because the learning that you will take part in is not the kind of learning experience when one just comes and gets a "gift" with no efforts - just by being there!

How many educators do we need in order to change the light bulb?

One is enough. But the bulb should want to be changed.