

**THESIS**

**Experiential learning methods and concretizing in supporting the learning process**

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# ABSTRACT

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While working at Hero's youth branch (Helsingin seudun erilaiset oppijat ry, Different learners of the Helsinki region), an organization advocating for people with learning differences, I discovered a need for adding experiential learning methods to the reflective content of the courses they conducted. My commissioners foremost need was to improve the quality of the data collected from the participants and provided for the funding parties. This led me to research the connection between experience and reflection and what could I offer as an adventure educator. After having dived into the topic, I found out there is an overall need to research the adventure education in relation to groups with special needs and what it could be, if not some extreme pursuit in a wilderness area.

The research method I used was action research. It allowed me to be an instructor and a researcher simultaneously, to make observations during hands-on experiences and adjust the actions taken according to the observations. I marked my findings in research diaries and linked my observations and actions with theories that supported my own findings. In addition to personal observations, my research diaries contained notions and feedback from the participants.

During this thesis process I instructed four different youth groups and made conclusions on the observations I made that led to interventions and applying new ideas. I adjusted my facilitation styles, passed on leadership to the participants and created a journaling protocol to concretize the learning journey from the participants.

The results show that there was additional value in adding active experiencing to the youth's lives. But in order to conduct a developmental project with significant results, requires from the instructor constant reflecting along the way and a deep understanding on what actions are being taken and why. Therefore, the methods and, for example, the journaling protocol are results on their own but need more developing to become proven parts of the courses.

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Keywords: adventure education, experiential learning, learning difficulties, action research, reflection, youth, sociocultural inspiration

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

I got to know Helsingin seudun erilaiset oppijat ry and its youth branch when I did my second and third practical training there during the spring and summer of 2021. Starting from autumn 2021 I have been working with them. This thesis covers the period from spring 2021 till the end of the same year. During spring I was co-instructing a course called Kite (Helsingin seudun erilaiset oppijat ry 2022a). The word ‘Kite’ comes from the words Kohti itsenäistä elämää, Towards an independent life, in English. Kite runs three days a week for three and a half months and concentrates on strengthening social -, studying – and working life skills. During summer and autumn, I was given a course to construct and conduct myself. Kiinni arkeen (Back to everyday life) -course is a lighter version of Kite with similar objectives but meetings only twice a week for three hours at a time.

The springtime was heavily influenced by Covid-19 restrictions and led to my practical training taking place mostly online. As an instructor for a youth group, I experienced the heavy weight of the lack of natural presence and concrete experiences. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for the participants, youth with learning differences (see chapter 1.2), whose first needs were social connection and finding motivation to leave their homes. Further on I learned that although in Kite-course, while the youth got a chance to participate a week-long camp in Lapland filled with activities, the day-to-day program of the course were a little bit less practical. There seems to be a lot of talking and sitting around, which is certainly a valuable way to converse, but I couldn’t help to think that these participants with their struggles in concentration, verbalization and perceptive skills would greatly benefit of a more practical approach.

The suitability of adventure education methods for different learners has been researched in Finland within the context of school aged children. (Karppinen 2005, Marttila 2010) The main emphasis has been on exclusion prevention and mapping out the needs for supporting the growth of the children by using adventure educational methods. I have not found research on using adventure education on young adults with learning differences who experience exclusion.

The purpose of this thesis work is to explore if adding experiential learning methods and creating a protocol for visualizing and actualizing individual and social progression of the participants, will lead them to recognize the positive changes that occur and enables them to assess their situation more accurately.

## **1.1 Commissioner**

The commissioner of my thesis is a local non-profit interest organization advocating for people with learning differences at the Helsinki region, Helsingin seudun erilaiset oppijat ry, (HERO). They provide information and training and organize events and activities related to the themes of learning differences and learning challenges. (Helsingin seudun erilaiset oppijat ry 2022b)

HERO is a regional branch working under an umbrella organization Erilaisten Oppijoiden Liitto (Federation of people with learning differences) (Erilaisten oppijoiden liitto ry 2022). Hero's courses are being led by freelancing teachers, instructors and volunteers. In the youth branch where I work, there are two full-time instructors and a mixed bunch of trainees and part-timers.

From now on in this thesis I will refer to HERO's youth branch as HERO.

## **1.2 Focus group**

The focus group of this thesis is the clientele of HERO. They are youth ranging from 17 to 29 years old who experience some sort of challenges with learning. They don't need a diagnose to qualify nor needs the learning challenge be already clearly identified. It is enough that the participant experiences the challenges, and the learning challenge can be identified during the courses. In my experience, the most common challenges with learning relate to Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, ADHD, Aspergers, Spatial learning disability, past drug abuse and mental health issues. The symptoms can vary a lot and range from difficulties in reading to impulse control issues and communicational challenges. According to my own observations, common with all the learning difficulties is that as undiagnosed and unaddressed they usually result to having low self-esteem.

Developmental learning difficulties are innate deviations in the functions of the central nervous system. They can appear differently at different stages of development and one can have multiple simultaneously. (Kuntoutussäätiö 2017.)

Alcohol and drug abuse and mental health issues seems to cause similar challenges with learning.

For example, issues with mental health temporarily affect a person's information processing and learning abilities (Kuntoutussäätiö 2017b).

Most of the participants are so called NEET-youth. NEET stands for that they are neither in education, employment or training (Tilastokeskus 2022). Many have had to drop out of school due to their learning challenge. Because of this many of them also lack a sensible structure in their days.

In my experience all of the participants experience some level of loneliness and lack of community and social relations. This loneliness seems to be one of the most critical factors that has led or can lead to exclusion.

Despite all these challenges this youth has an enormous number of skills and strengths that they bring in when they join a course. These qualities are usually hidden because of the contradictions that the participants might experience between themselves and the surrounding external structures.

The courses are based on voluntariness but many of the participants are being steered in by some other operator that might not have the same principles.

### **1.3 Needs**

At HERO we have noticed that many of the participants has insufficient self-reflection skills. This affects not only to the youth's own ability to assess their situations and the progress of personal growth but also the commissioner's ability to provide reliable data of the positive changes that occur during the courses to the funding parties. With the content of the courses being mostly contemplating on one's life on an abstract level, I have noticed that the methods in use do not sufficiently take in consideration the special needs and limitations of my commissioner's clientele. Constant reflecting of one's life, which seems to have no meaning, content or direction, can be frustrating. Reflection and increasing self-knowledge are, of course, very important in the work of exclusion prevention but should be included in the process combined with experiential methods. For example, following the experiential learning cycle (see page 11-12) would shift the focus from the participant's private struggles and problems to seeing and identifying the process of self-empowerment and personal development as a part of a group that

supports the process. Because of the vast range in the ways of learning among the participants they would probably benefit of more holistic methods.

“[...] it can be said that the concreteness of adventure – and experiential pedagogical nature sports, the involvement of movement and the use of different sensory channels as well as the functionality facilitates learning difficulties. The adventure – and experiential pedagogical concepts of head, hand and heart come alive in the learning process of the different learners.” (Marttila 2010, 64.)

During the summer course that I conducted in HERO with trying to comprise an adventure education -based program for different learners through outdoor activities, sociocultural animation and learning critical thinking, I noticed that the sheer functionality and spending time outdoors increased the operating capability of the participants. The reflection part, however, was not working properly due to the participant’s varying challenges with concentration, abstract thinking and memorizing things. This led me thinking about how to make the reflection process more concrete and concentrated. So, I discovered a need for not only functional methods but also for low entry level reflection protocol that could progress into deeper reflection and bring out the progression of the participants’ own learning process.

For the autumn course I started to plan a journaling reflection protocol that I had been thinking about during the summer. I was hesitant to apply it because I thought that having to write down one’s mind would resurrect the traumatic learning experiences from school that many of the participants surely had. This evoked a thought about reshaping the journaling in a way that the participants would not have to necessarily write down anything, but they could choose their method of applying the thoughts to the paper. It meant that they could write, draw, poke holes, burn or make origami out of the pages, as long as they have a date written down and they could interpret their own scribbles. This would shift the focus from having to produce writing to getting to choose your own style, thus shifting the power to the participant. It led me to think more about how to support the participants’ agency and how to place the learner to the center of the learning process. Instead of just organizing activities and facilitating conversations, the challenge was how to animate the youth to take action and start to take responsibility of their own lives.



## 2 KNOWLEDGE BASE

In this chapter I will introduce the theories behind my research. The basis consists of five different theories that link to my research and help to understand the actions I have taken to conduct the research.

### 2.1 Experiential learning

To be able to understand how can adventure education benefit people with learning differences, it is needed to have a look at what is experiential learning.

“[...] we can informally define experiential learning as learning by doing combined with reflection.” (Priest & Gass 2005, 146).

King (1988) has described experience as being a reaction to stimuli and that everything that happens to us in our lives are experiences. Having an experience, however, does not automatically result into learning but one must reflect upon that experience in order to attain its teachings.

The experiential learning process is usually portrayed in a form of an experiential learning cycle (Fig.1). According to Kolbe all learning is relearning which means that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience (Kolb 2015, 39). This justifies the use of the cycle form as it illustrates the ongoing, dynamic and transactional process of learning via experience. The learning cycle visualizes well how the process of reflective observing during and after a concrete experience leads to creating abstract conceptualizations based on these reflections. These newly found concepts act as a base for active experimentation, thus leading us back to the concrete experience. The visualized dual dialectics of action (AE) and reflection (RO), and experience (CE) and abstraction (AC) lean on Kolbe’s definition of learning as a process where knowledge is being created through the transformation of experience (Kolb 2015, 51) (Fig.1.)

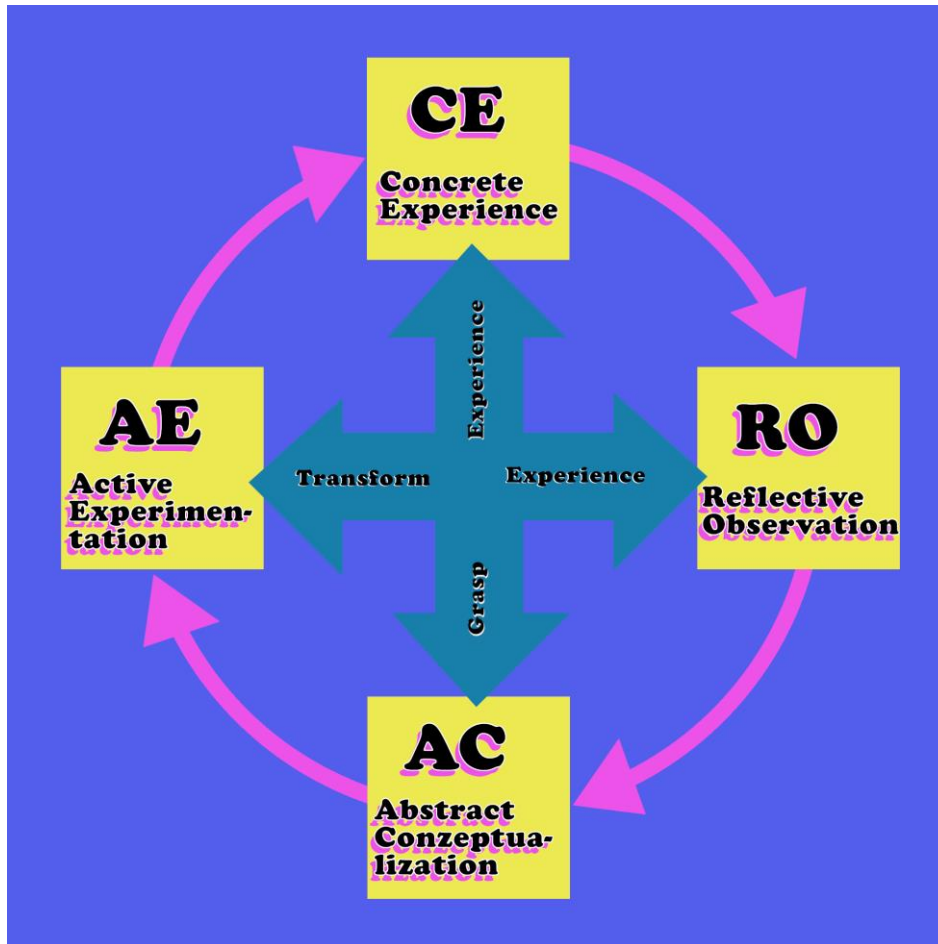


Figure 1. Experiential learning cycle according to Kolb (Kolb 2015).

My observations on Hero's functions have led me to think about how easily we tend to separate the learning from the doing, i.e. the reflection from the experience. The reflecting can be done in a very general manner, relying on the participants' own abilities to link these generalizations to their private lives. Also, the concrete experiences are being left mostly unattended, thus unintentionally leaving to chance the process of transferring learning from an experience to one's life.

## 2.2 Facilitating the experience

Priest and Gass (2005, 184) defines facilitation as techniques that are used to widen the adventure experience based on careful assessment of the clients' needs. The purpose of facilitation is to steer the clients through the experience and enhance the functional change and provide an opportunity for transferring the learning that can lead to lasting changes.

Facilitation can be divided into six generations of styles evolved over time through the development of the field. They are being used according to the purpose and goals of the adventure program at hand. Learning by doing is a first-generation facilitation style, where you let the experience speak for itself without much visible facilitating. Second-generation facilitation style is to speak for the experience, explaining to the clients what they have learnt. Third-generation facilitation includes debriefing the experience i.e. reflecting it. Fourth one is directly frontloading the experience by reflecting beforehand the experience. Fifth one is isomorphic framing of the experience combined with reflection. Sixth style is indirectly frontloading the experience with using a paradox to make change occur. The nature of the adventure program directs you to use the appropriate facilitation style. Adventure programs are being divided to recreational, educational, developmental and therapeutic ones. (Priest & Gass 2005, 189-195.)

It is of most importance to identify the goals and purpose of the group you are instructing to be able to use the appropriate facilitation style. Hero's programs are developmental ones with some therapeutical elements, without really being therapeutic programs.

Developmental programs can be seen to improve functional behavior and to train new and different ones, thus the third, fourth and fifth generations of facilitation fit best. Therapeutical programs aim to reduce dysfunctional behavior and condition participants to use positive behavior. Fifth and sixth generations of facilitation work the best for this one. (Pries & Gass 2005, 194.)

Although among Hero's youth there are a vast variety of people with a vast variety of challenges, abilities and personalities, and many of the facilitation styles might work for some of them, for effectively fostering growth it would be justified to look more into the fifth-generation facilitation style.

### **2.3 Isomorphic framing**

While it is essential and quite obvious to have a resource-based approach while working with disaffected youth, like NEET can be described as a part of, it is useful to recognize the problems as well.

Christian (2011, 175) suggests that the most common negative personality constructs within disaffected youth are low self-esteem, high anxiety and low confidence. Acknowledging the most pressing issue helps to prescribe an experience or an activity that addresses it.

Due to the nature of the negative constructs, it would not be very wise to approach them in a straightforward manner. Addressing these problems should be subtle. Isomorphic framing is one way to look into it.

Isomorphic framing is a way of facilitating activities with the help of using metaphors that are equivalent in structure to the ideas or problems they address. This style of facilitation requires a deep knowledge of the participants' challenges, as the activity is being constructed to address these challenges by matching the needs and goals of the participant with the needs and goals of the activity. The framing of the experience should be done prior to the experience to produce the behavior change within the experience. Creating the isomorphic framework can be divided into seven steps. (Priest & Gass 2005, 215-220.)

1. Assessing, identifying and ranking client needs and goals.
2. Selecting the metaphoric activity that meets the client needs, i.e creating the isomorphic connections.
3. Identifying the successful resolutions to the issue at hand by hypothesizing the positive resolution of the activity to match with an isomorphic real-life situation. A set-back during the activity should also represent a real-life set-back.
4. Strengthening the isomorphic framework by “translating” the frame story and the storyline of the activity to the language and symbols that are used by clients themselves.
5. Reviewing client motivation by checking that the content really matches the client goals and needs, and that the content creates the desired metaphors.
6. Conducting the experience with possible revisions or reframing that clarifies the isomorphic connections.
7. Debriefing the experience by bringing out the fact that successful outcome from the activity that represents a real-life situation can be seen as a capability of handling that real-life situation, as well.

(Priest & Gass 2005, 215-220.)

## 2.4 Sociocultural animation

“To adventure in the natural environment is consciously to take up a challenge that will demand the best of our capabilities – physically, mentally and emotionally.” (Mortlock 2000, 19.)

Most times when you hear the word adventure, it leads you to think about mountaineering at high altitudes or hiking in the wilderness, or any other extreme pursuit in harsh surroundings. It would seem like a group with special needs and challenges are denied of adventuring altogether. However, if an adventure could be seen as a venture with the element of unknown in the environment or in the operating mode, adventure can be found at any scale or intensity. If a person is stuck in their home, living in a small circle of life that is in a way very safe and predictable, yet suffering from loneliness and lack of communication, a venture outside their home to an environment unknown with a culture that seems odd will probably demand the best of their capabilities.

Kurki (2000, 19-32) describes the basic requirements of sociocultural animation as getting people sensitized, motivated and on the move. Sociocultural animation is communal activity and a form of education without being taught on. It is a way to motivate individuals and groups to educate themselves instead of giving them ready answers, and to support them to self-actualization. The significance of interaction, participation and the group play a key role in the pedagogical approach. The target group is usually somewhat excluded or has challenges with participating activities. Sociocultural animation supports the participants' initiative and freedom and encourages them to find their own kind of solutions and resorts. Sociocultural animation is not just any kind of social group activity, but it is a purposeful one and it has to be planned accordingly. It is essential to use active, creative and experiential methods that aim to address a participant's personal situation, and to enhance lasting and continuous processes that encourage to activity, instead of using separate and de-attached ones.

As an instructor a sociocultural animator needs to understand interpersonal relationships and has to be sensitive to tensions in the group to be able to solve conflict situations. The instructor needs to find a way to lead their group without using much authority and needs to be able to spot and accept participants' initiatives. (Kurki 2000, 83.)

## 2.5 Leadership styles

“Leadership is a process of influence based on power.” (Priest & Gass 2005, 250).

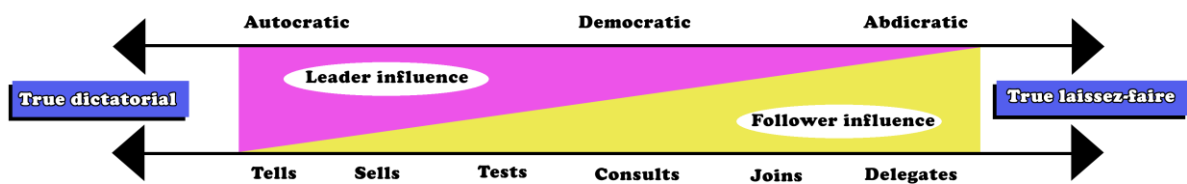


Fig.2 A continuum of outdoor leadership styles according to Priest and Gass (Priest & Gass 2005, 245.)

Leadership could be seen as a process in which the levels of leader and follower influences vary depending on the goals and the conditional favorability of the activity. The leadership styles (Fig.2 bottom row) are being carefully selected according to those variables. Ideally, a group process would evolve steadily from autocratic (dictatorial leader power) to abdicratic (total group power), invalidating the need for a leader altogether. However, I doubt that any group could work as a well lubricated machine for an eternity as the circumstances change all the time.

Conditional outdoor leadership theory (Priest & Chase 1989) divides conditional favorability into five factors: Environmental dangers, Individual competence, Group unity, Leader proficiency and Decision consequences. These factors are measured in levels from low to high. Another variable is on whether the activity is oriented in completing a task or in maintaining the group relationships. The quantitative ratio between the three kinds of decision-making power (autocratic, democratic and abdicratic) is depended on all the variables mentioned. (Priest & Gass 2005, 246-248.) (Fig.3.)

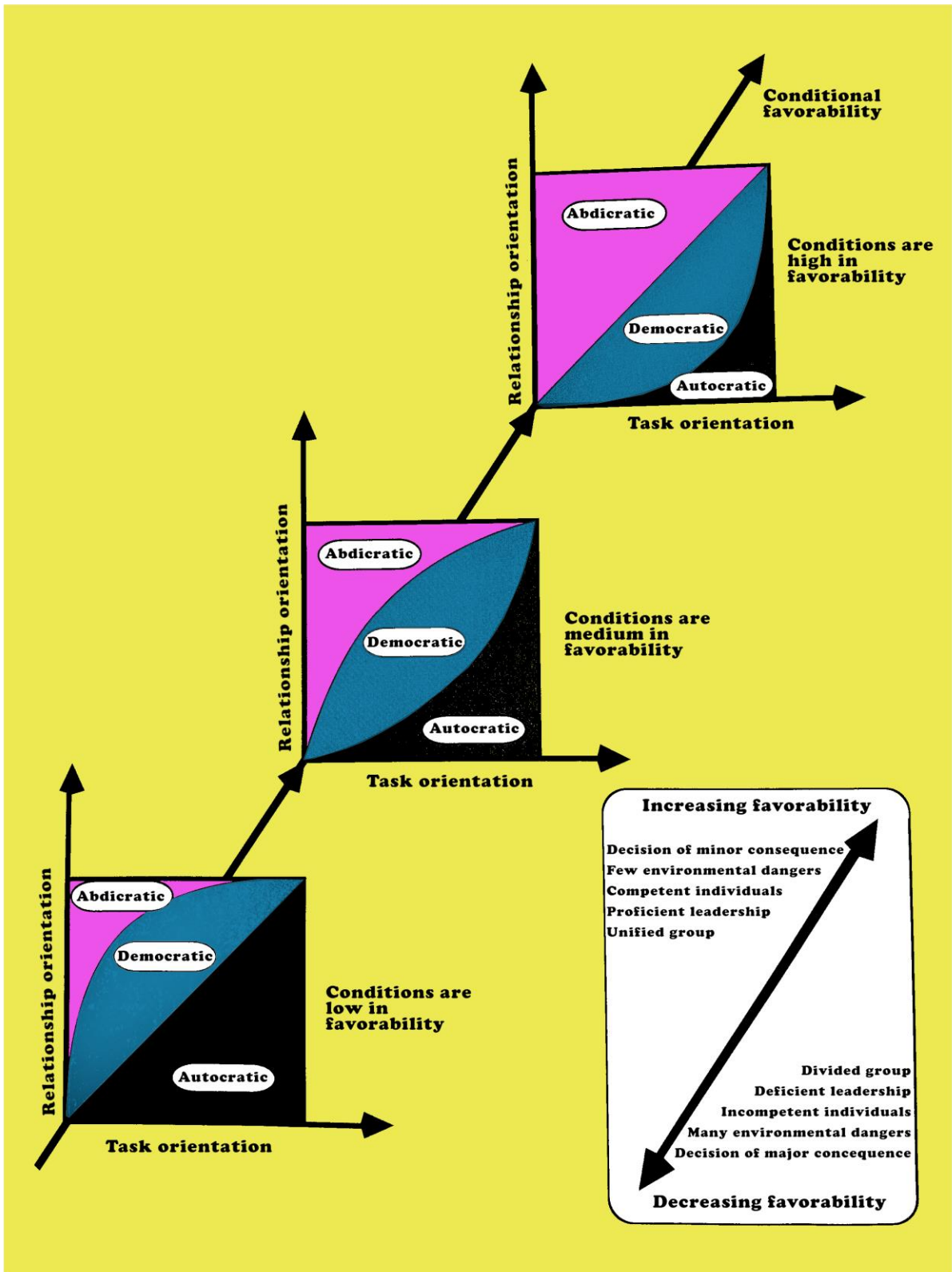


Figure 3. The conditional outdoor leadership theory as seen by Priest & Gass (2005, 248).

Most times in Hero's activities the orientation for relationships is valued over the orientation for a task and the conditions are on a medium level of favorability, and so the nature of decision-making power concerning relationships is ideally abdicratic/democratic and democratic/autocratic concerning task orientation. Usually, the favorability levels of environmental dangers, leader proficiency and decision consequences are very high whereas the favorability levels of individual competence and group unity can vary a lot. Surely, there has been occasions where the conditions have been low in favorability, as well.

Anyhow, the nature of leadership is never static, but a dynamic process where an instructor needs to constantly observe and assess the situation and reflect their own behavior as well.



## 3 MEASURES

In this chapter I will present the method that I used to conduct the research and explain why I did choose this particular one. I will also describe the research process and the use of it in practice.

### 3.1 Action research

Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that focuses on specific situations and localized solutions, unlike traditional scientific research which looks for generalized explanations that can be applied to all contexts. The aim is to help find appropriate solutions to particular problems that are confronted in everyday lives of people acting in various fields of work. The approach can increase the effectiveness and meaningfulness of their work and help to work through complex issues they might face. (Stringer 2007, 1,5)

The research strategy in Action research aims to study reality with the intention of changing it, unlike in a traditional academical approach in its aim to observe the current reality. In the center of the approach is the involvement and the participation of the people whom it concerns. The actions that are taken are the subject and the method of the research, as well as the aim of it. (Jyrkämä 2022.)

In order to observe a dynamic of any community, an action researcher needs to be in contact with the community it aims to research.

The role of the researcher can vary from being actively involved to passively observing depending on the case. The actively involved researcher has to play two roles at the same time, being an instructor and a researcher simultaneously. (Zieman 2012, 51)

The basic routine of action research comes down to the terms: Look, Think and Act. The first step (Look) is to investigate, gather data and describe the starting situation. Second step (Think) is for analyzing and theorizing, which will act as a base for the third one (Act) where planning, implementing and evaluating are being done. This seemingly linear routine should be seen as a continuous spiral (Fig.4) of reviewing, reflecting and modifying actions that will allow the

researcher to re-try their actions as they gain more knowledge during the process. (Stringer 2007, 8-9.)

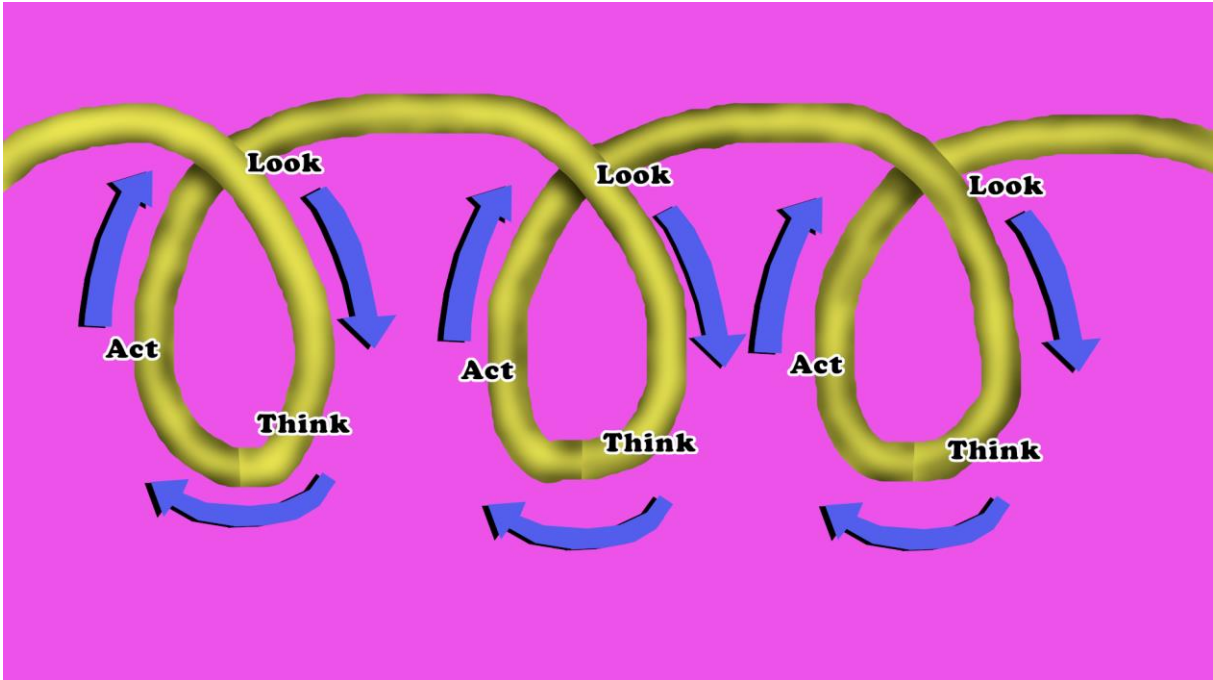


Figure 4. Action research interacting spiral as viewed by Stringer (2007).

It is in the nature of action research to use various forms of data and methods. This leads to action research not necessarily being strictly qualitative or quantitative type of research, although constant observing and the use of research diary are the essence of it. (Jyrkämä 2022.)

### 3.2 Why Action research?

Adventure educators and researchers have been relying heavily on group-based research in order to assess the impact of adventure education on individuals. To establish a mean from group data, is to lose the focus on adventure education programmes effectiveness on an individual attendant. Avoiding this would mean that a researcher would need to focus more on the needs and development of the individuals during and after the program. (Christian 2011, 173.)

Actively participating action researcher/instructor will be able to observe individual participants' needs and development during the programme, the group dynamics among the participants as well as the resources of the working community.

Many times, Hero's youth lack the ability for self-assessment, or they tend to see themselves as less capable of doing things than they really are. They are used to filling out forms and to listing their problems and diagnoses to social workers and doctors etc. but tend to struggle with reflecting their own life. It would not make much sense to add more questionnaires to measure the stagnant conception of the self, or to add on to the anxiety of being a subject to assessment. Thus, the research diaries of the action researcher are more likely to provide more reliable data.

### **3.3 The process**

The research process lasted for 11 months, starting from February of 2021 till the end of 2021. During this period, I observed three different groups. My role with these groups has slightly changed over time. I started with Kite-group as part of my second practical training at Humak during spring of 2021. The following summer I spent conducting Kiinni arkeen -course as a worker paid by the hour and as part of my final training period. During autumn I continued with another Kiinni Arkeen -course.

During all this time, I made observations on the groups, individuals and on the overall working culture and methods at Hero. During the first spring, I kept record of the observations somewhat vaguely since I was still getting to know the new place. I started to have a more systematic approach since the beginning of summer as in the form of research diaries. In these diaries I started to record things like attendance, description of operations, observations on the group and individuals and if the pedagogical objectives I had defined earlier were met or needed to be adjusted. Based on these observations I started to create new approaches that I would test with the groups and went on to reflect the results to either spiral onwards with new ideas, or to take a step back and find a new approach altogether, following the Action research interaction spiral (Fig.4). With all the findings, I started to recognize re-occurring themes that were in the center of this research. I searched for theories that would address these themes and again it led

me to adjust the operations of the courses that I worked with. The results and conclusions of this research process I will present in the next chapters.

## 4 RESULTS

I am going to present the results of my research process divided in three sections according to the different courses I led. Between these sections, I made some midway conclusion, or assumptions, that led me to adjust my operations and the content of the courses. The four sections link together and should be seen as a progressive process of action research.

### 4.1 Spring

As I got to know Hero's mode of operations during the Kite-course, I noticed that the content of the course relied heavily on a guidebook called Hevari.

Hevari (Henkilökeskeinen voimavaravalmennus) is a person-centric resource coaching guide for youth groups compiled by The Finnish Central Association of Mental Health. The coaching process is divided in ten sessions. In each session there is a theme and various tasks and exercises. The book guides instructors carefully through the sessions and provides material content for the participants as well. (Pöllönen & Nissinen & Kainulainen & Kukkonen 2019.)

As the course proceeded, I made two important notions. The first one was that the level of activity in the group was quite low. Mainly the reason for this was the sad fact that a set of Covid-19 restrictions was forced upon us and soon after the kick-off each of us instructing or attending the course were sitting in front of a computer screen. But even excluding the unfortunate situation, the guidebook we used did not encourage to being active that much. The second notion was that even though Hevari was a groupwork method, it did not seem to rely much on the natural group processes and the experiences they evoke. Somehow it seemed to leave out a great deal of potential energy that lay underneath.

I suspected that even though some of the participants would seem like they would be physically, socially and verbally passive, they could be somehow lured into action and reflection. For example, in the course, we had a moment of mapping out the group's mood at the beginning of each day and at the end of them. Many times, I noted that the participants mood in the morning was "*I'm ok*", and at the end of the day it was "*I'm ok*". This example shows the level of challenge in gathering information, as well as the level of self-expression and reflective skills of the

participants. As instructors, we collected some of this data for the financiers to measure the effectiveness of our actions. Mainly we used verbal reflection together with visual aids, like expressive faces or figures. These aids are a good addition to help the verbal efforts, but somehow, I found myself wondering that if instead of using ready-made material, could the youth produce their own materials. This could perhaps enforce and concretize the idea of the reflection being mainly for the youth themselves, and that they are not being (only) assessed from above, thus calling out for more active participation.

I noticed that a constant reflecting of one's life, which seems to have no meaning, content or direction, can be frustrating for the participants. Since the courses are not meant to be therapeutic but developmental ones, I wondered if digging deep into past and current stagnation is serving this purpose. Reflection and increasing self-knowledge are, of course, very important in the work of exclusion prevention but could be included in the process combined with experiential methods. This led me to think about the purposefulness of reflecting upon generalized and past individual experiences as opposed to having immediate experiences as a group to reflect on. For example, following the experiential learning cycle (Fig.1) would shift the focus from the participant's private struggles and problems to seeing and identifying the process of self-empowerment and personal development as a part of a group that can, ideally, support this process.

An eye-opening experience as an instructor was the results of an exercise that I planned together with my colleague. I chose two short-stories for the participants to interpret, and we planned together a writing exercise. They were meant to evoke creativity and to show the myriads of perspectives among us humans. The stories that I chose were in my mind very short and simple, but fairly insightful ones. However, I was surprised by the participants' struggles to interpret the text, but even more it surprised me to notice how the challenge of doing so motivated and enlivened the youth to work on the subject even more enthusiastically. The writing exercise followed a similar pattern. Even though, I did not perceive the level of challenge of the exercises to be a great one, the participants experienced it as a challenge, and by this challenge they were suddenly animated. This confirmed my suspicion on the following: adjusting the level of challenge of the activities with taking in consideration the learning challenges of the participants is a merciful act in a world that is not merciful for those who do not conform but it also carries within the danger of unintentional condescension and the underestimation of the potential capabilities that the youth withhold. Realizing this, I was reminded of sociocultural animation in its essence to *“use active, creative and experiential methods that aim to address a participants*

*personal situation, and to enhance lasting and continuous processes that encourage to activity*” (see page 15). I noted that this approach matches with my views and my intuitive ways of instructing.

As a conclusion of the main results of this term, I picked two important themes. The first one was the realization of the need to increase participation, activity and immediate experiences to the contents of the courses. The second one was to shift the focus of the reflection from directly addressing the participants’ private lives (which might even evoke feelings of hopelessness when they realize the full scale of their troubles) to a more indirect approach with linking the reflection to the immediate, shared experiences and the group processes (which could center the focus of the reflection to the resources they have). Related to the second theme, was the aim to visualize and concretize the learnings. I thought about trying out a reflective journaling protocol with the youth but came to the conclusion that for having to write a lot could evoke some very unpleasant memories from the past experiences of struggling with schoolwork and make the reflection too formal in a way. I decided to mull over this problem and save the idea for a later date.

The springs Kite-course ended and so did my second practical training for Humak. I was given the opportunity to conduct a course called Kiinni Arkeen. I was to plan and implement the program for the summer myself. It was also the start of my last practical training.

## **4.2 Summer**

Kiinni Arkeen -course took place from June to July covering 7 weeks of summer. All the activities, count out the last day, took place outdoors or outside Hero’s premises. Spending a lot of time outside was my intention anyway, but the horrors of sweating indoors with a mask on, smelling like hand sanitizer did not seem appealing to any one and made the decision to do so even easier. We ventured to nature sites, swam in lakes and the sea, learned outdoor skills like orienteering, use of knife and axe, fire making, cooking with live fire and roamed some museums, as well.

The aim to add active experiences was greatly fulfilled as we explored Helsinki and the surrounding municipalities. Even though the amount of outdoor activity was uncommon to most participants, they enjoyed the course and its contents.

“It’s nice that we’ve moved around outside a lot. I feel much more energetic. The physical exercise is good for me... and the adventures.”

“I don’t usually move around that much in my everyday life, but I like this.”

(Quotes from participants, an extract from my research diaries).

Based on my observations, adding active experiences brought additional value to the lives of the participants. Adding physical exercise and experientialism, however, is not yet adventure education as the experiences needs to be examined more closely. At the end of each day, I facilitated a moment of reflecting the days activities. As the level of the activities was quite easy, the reflection did not go very deep either. I started to think about purposefulness of reflecting this way and had also been mulling over how to *“enhance lasting and continuous processes that encourage to activity”* (see page 15) as suggested by the principles of sociocultural animation. I realized something that I should have known already. The experiences are not important in themselves. The thing that the experience represents, is important. An example follows:

“18.06 klo 10.30-14.30 A trip to Leppävaara in Espoo. Searched and examined wild herbs, walking in the nature. Identifying edible plants and observing nature. Safely “getting lost” to a thicket and a co-operative push through + crossing a stream (co-operative skills).

Discussion on the demands that all of us face in our lives. Which of them are coming from outside and which ones we set to ourselves? Are all of these demands real? Do we need to live up to a universal standard and does it even exist?” (Extract from my research diaries.)

The example here shows how a plan to reflect on the experience of easy-going plant picking transforming into a small venture through harsh terrain demanding teamwork turned out to have a more meaningful insight. As we left the clear path and started to push through the thicket, I heard and sensed the participants embarrassment of doing something so unconventional as to leave an easy path to roam around the forest like small children but eventually our side-quest was enjoyed by the youth after all. I decided to change the perspective of the reflection to address the feelings evoked by the sudden change of plans that seemed to break the rules of conventional behavior. The discussion that followed was really a fruitful one as the participants contemplated on the topics of demands and power. The intended topic of reflection that would



have addressed the participants' need for social connections transformed into a topic that addressed a far more important need, the need for social justification. So, I suspected that evoking critical thinking could help the participants to examine their relationships to themselves and the demands they have set for themselves. It would act as a basis for them to grow up to be emphatic human beings, as being emphatic is the basis for growing to be active democratic citizens. Even though one might not agree with their surrounding realities, they could accept it and find their place among the various opinions and ways of acting in the society. It could also help them to recognize the intertwined interests that dictate so much of the social functions around us, some of which might not pass the sieve of critical thinking or empathy.

This example of successful reflection was a result of improvised change of plans, although I had planned to address the topic at some point anyway. For an instructor, being open and sensitive is an essential tool for picking up information from the participants in order to learn what moves them. This case led me to examine different facilitation styles and as I was leading a developmental program, I learned about the facilitation techniques that could support it. The base of isomorphic framing -technique, *“acknowledging the most pressing issue [that] helps to prescribe an experience or an activity that addresses it”* (see page 13), seemed to fit my observations on the importance of connecting the experience to reflection in a meaningful way. I also redefined for myself the definition of “the most pressing issue” not being alone the participants' diagnoses or the learning difficulty but their conception of themselves and the world molded by their past experiences.

Although improvising and being sensitive helps to bring up these issues, it would require a great deal of time and planning to properly construct a program that does not rely on serendipity. Also, the role of reflection as a way to interpret the metaphors inside the experiences and transfer the learning to the participants own lives is essential but seems to require more time and a way to concretize the learning. The youth easily tend to forget what has happened the day before, or last week, thus making it hard for them to see their own progress even though it would be happening on some level.

During the summer I found myself steering the ship even more than I felt was needed. I pre-planned all the activities and studied the places we would go. I felt that for my own progress as an instructor it was still justified to hold the helm, but for the participants to be able to continue their journey without someone who does the groundwork for them, it might not be. I decided to reassess and adjust my leadership style for the autumn's course.

To conclude the summers results, I would say that adding the activity was done successfully and led to positive results. Reflection was implemented with varying success and seemed to require more time and tranquility. The lack of time was a result of the group being on the move at all times and the scarcity of my working hours (I was working paid by the hour). To plan the reflections to a more effective direction would require more time for the planning process.

I resurrected the idea of a journaling protocol with the new addition on how to make it more approachable and pleasant for the participants. I would give the participants a blank journal to fill themselves in whichever way they want to (write, draw, paint, poetry, poke holes etc.) as long as they can interpret the content themselves. This was because I suspected that it would take the pressure off from having to produce sensible text to show to others and give the participants a sense of control whilst recording their thoughts and their learning process.

### 4.3 Autumn

#### “1.10. Outdoor- and indoor activities in Pasila 2,5 hours

Games and group forming activities. Starting to think about a personal goal in the group. Start to use the journal. Filled every day for 10-15 min. The mode of delivery of one’s thoughts to the journal is free of form (draw, write, destroy) as long as there is a date to be seen. The purpose of the journal is to set a demand for expressing thoughts and feelings but in a way that one feels comfortable with and thus giving a freedom of choice in addition to the demand. People with learning differences can possibly have traumatic experiences with school and learning, and so the transfer of power to the participant is needed so it can give the freedom of choice and enhance creativity. In a best-case scenario, the journal can become a way of self-expression that will live on after the course has ended, or it can otherwise open a channel for expressing oneself. At the beginning the topic is also free of choice and one doesn’t have to share unless wants to. As the course proceeds, the thoughts start to be shared with the group. This of course in addition to shared reflections and discussions.” (Extract from my research diaries).

The Autumns course began with the implementation of the journaling protocol that would make the reflection more systematic and it would concretize the learning process for the participants.

For my surprise the journaling was received quite well. I had expected some murmur and rebellion but instead the youth got to work without a lot of persuasion. Some seemed to be drawing while others seemed to focus on writing. Some finished the task quickly while others took their time. We had agreed that the moment of individual reflection would be a moment of silence and calm, without the use of personal devices. A hidden agenda of this exercise was to practice to cope with a short moment of nothing happening and focusing attention to one's thoughts whilst giving space for others to focus as well. To facilitate this type of reflection, it is essential for the instructor to follow the same guidelines as the participants do to set an example and respect the participants' efforts as well. I filled my journal along with the youth.

Another intervention concerned the leadership power and involved shifting the power more to the participants themselves. Right at the beginning I started to map out the participants' own skills and interests to be able to enforce their self-confidence by utilizing them to the course. I planned the contents in a way that everyone would have a chance to shine. I aimed to give the participants more responsibilities according to their strengths, or to ask them to teach a skill they had. Another concrete way to enhance participation and give more responsibility to the participants was the implementation of the day that they would plan themselves. The idea was to give a timeframe and a budget but otherwise try to take a step back and let the participants plan what they wanted. Both ideas worked at first, even though the participants found it challenging to plan their own activities. Apparently, they did not have a clue what a group of young people could do together but were clever enough to consult the internet instead of asking an instructor.

Even though the Autumn course began with a lot of experiential activity and implementation of new ideas, soon the Covid-19 restrictions were resurrected and hit hard the new-found and still fragile group. As the society shut down once again, the youth reacted heavily. It became harder and harder to lure participants to go outside and so most of the activities had to be moved indoors. The participants' attendances dropped and it was a real chore to improvise the contents when most of it was planned for a group. The closer we got to the darkest time of the year, the gloomier the group got. The few participants who dragged themselves to the courses were many times disappointed due to the lack of fellow participants, as their foremost need was to get more social connections.

All in all, the scarcity of attendees set an enormous challenge to the group activity and left the results of the new implementations scarce as well. As an instructor, I was struggling most of

the time, doing my best to support the youth with their challenges that were made heavier by the decisions of the authorities, effects of which I would suffer myself as well. Despite all the challenges, the reflective journaling left some of the youth wondering if they could in some form incorporate reflection to their daily lives and having to plan their own day of activity seemed to gently push them to converse and work together. These positive results encouraged me to continue developing this approach and shone some light to otherwise such dark times.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning, as the active experiences of the courses were increased, I noted that even though the participants found the increased activity effecting their mental and physical well-being in a positive way, the reflection was carried out a bit haphazardly and demanded more time and more careful facilitation. Reserving more time and a tranquil setting for the reflection was carried out successfully during the Autumn course and the journaling protocol concretized, visualized and recorded the participants learnings but faced some difficulties. Due to the pandemic related restrictions and the cause of them, the youth participated the course every now and then, making it hard to process the group relations and to plan consistent and progressive reflections. Despite this, the journal for some became a personal habit to record their thoughts and thus fulfilled one of its main purposes. The journal still in my mind has a great potential of becoming a tool for reflection, although it needs more developing to make it a more concise method. Using more time to develop the journal could transform it from being an exercise among others to becoming a wholesome method that would serve the goals of the course in bringing out the progress of learning for the participants and for Hero as well. This method takes in consideration the characteristics and the special needs of the focus group. My colleagues at Hero consider the journal as being an effective method and it has been approved also as a part of measuring the goals of the Kite-course, although the method is still being adjusted.

In my mind, all adventure educational methods and tools should be carefully adjusted and levelled according to the participants characteristics. It is a process that demands a lot of time and effort of the instructor. Hero is not conducting leisure activities that can be performed as such using a ready-made template, but conducting developmental, goal-oriented programs that demand from the instructor high sensitivity towards the group and the will to constantly reflect their work along the way. Instead of leading random activities, an educator facilitates progressive processes, the impressiveness of which can be measured. For an instructor, self-reflecting along the way during the program is the most powerful tool for creating desired outcomes for the ongoing course and its participants but also it is to fortify the purposefulness of the overall approach we take as educators. Instructors in this line of work should not be seen as people who lead easygoing after school activities, but as educators doing developmental work which requires time for planning, reflecting and revisions before, during and after the courses.

The original purpose of this thesis was to add experientialism and to develop the methods of self-evaluation of the youth, that would lead to the more accurate data of the impressiveness of the programs at Hero. It was evident that to increase participants' self-knowledge and self-evaluation skills, it would require reflecting. As noted before in this thesis, experience precedes reflection but since Hero's programs are not therapeutic ones, it would not be of use to reflect too much on past experiences but to create new immediate ones. Past experiences are likely the cause of exclusion and stagnation in the youths' lives and reflecting the past experiences is the work for a therapist. In leading a developmental, inclusive program, we take in consideration the past experiences that have led to the stagnation but aim to create new experiences that participate and animate the youth. For the focus group of Hero, it is not easy to facilitate emotionally significant experiences, since exclusion has made many of the youths' lives stagnant. Before jumping into experiencing and reflecting on a deeper level, the focus group needs to get excited. Using the methods and principles of socio-cultural animation is a way to lure the youth to take action and speak their minds. To see the youth in action is the key for the instructor in getting to know your group. For this particular focus group, socio-cultural animation accompanies experiences that can together enhance the possibility of finding out experiences that can be facilitated and reflected purposefully.

Socio-cultural animation animates the youth to take action and allows the instructors to get to know the youth and their strengths and challenges through the experiences. To evoke meaningful experiences that can be purposefully reflected, the facilitators need to address the strengths and challenges of the youth in so that they can be dealt with through the experiences. Isomorphic framing could help to steer the behavioral patterns to a new direction with an indirect approach. With isomorphic framing, settings are made for experiences in which dealing with difficult matters can be addressed indirectly and safely on a metaphorical level. Successful outcomes of the activity link to successful outcomes in real life. When familiarizing myself with different facilitation styles, I noticed that I have used techniques similar to isomorphic framing in my work with Hero. To link the theory with the so-far intuitive approach would strengthen the effect for sure.

Although, it is essential to plan and develop the programs towards a more goal-oriented approach, it is important to keep in mind that for the participants the activities should come out as pressureless. The need for this is especially important with this particular group, since they are common with experiences of high pressure and anxiety due to their learning difficulties.

The pressureless atmosphere encourages the participants to come out of their covers and find their own ways of interacting with the surrounding world. Hopefully it would also lead to participants evaluating themselves by their own measures and not by some unachievable extrinsic standards.

At the beginning of this thesis process, I was to research if adding more experiential learning methods and concretizing the learning process would lead to participants' improved self-assessment skills. Adventure educational methods seems to withhold a great potential when working with people with learning differences. These methods can steer the focus to the youths own developmental process, thus increasing self-knowledge and feelings of success, and enhancing the transfer of new knowledge to their day-to-day lives. The journaling method has succeeded in visualizing and recording the learning process of the participants and on the long run, I think it could improve the data gathered for the funding parties, as well.

The research topic was not uncomplicated at all. The more I dived into the topic, the further I needed to go to define what is adventure education and reflection in the context of people with learning differences. As this thesis hopefully points out, in adventure education, we need to take in consideration multiple elements for the actions we take would be purposeful and meaningful. It is of most importance to research and define the ways we work in relation to the focus group we work with. This is especially important in working with groups with special needs and challenges. Even more, it would be essential to adjust the definition of adventure into something more approachable and philosophical altogether.

## 6 CRITICAL REVIEW

To this section I have collected the factors that might affect the reliability of this thesis work.

First of all, it is important to understand that the research data relies solely on my personal notes and observations. Although I have consistently reflected my own perspectives, they are inevitably being affected by everything I have experienced in my life. It would be interesting to learn someone else's point of view on the same subject matter.

Also, it would have strengthened the data to have used interviews of the participants alongside the observations but in this thesis, it would have led to the work growing out of proportions.

The research method of this thesis was completely qualitative of nature. I wonder if accompanied with quantitative methods, there could be found factors and indicators that would lead to even more relevant data for the commissioner and for the adventure educational theory.

The research work was implemented during extraordinary times. Covid-19 restrictions had an undeniable effect on working in close contact with people. The results could have differed at less turbulent times.



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